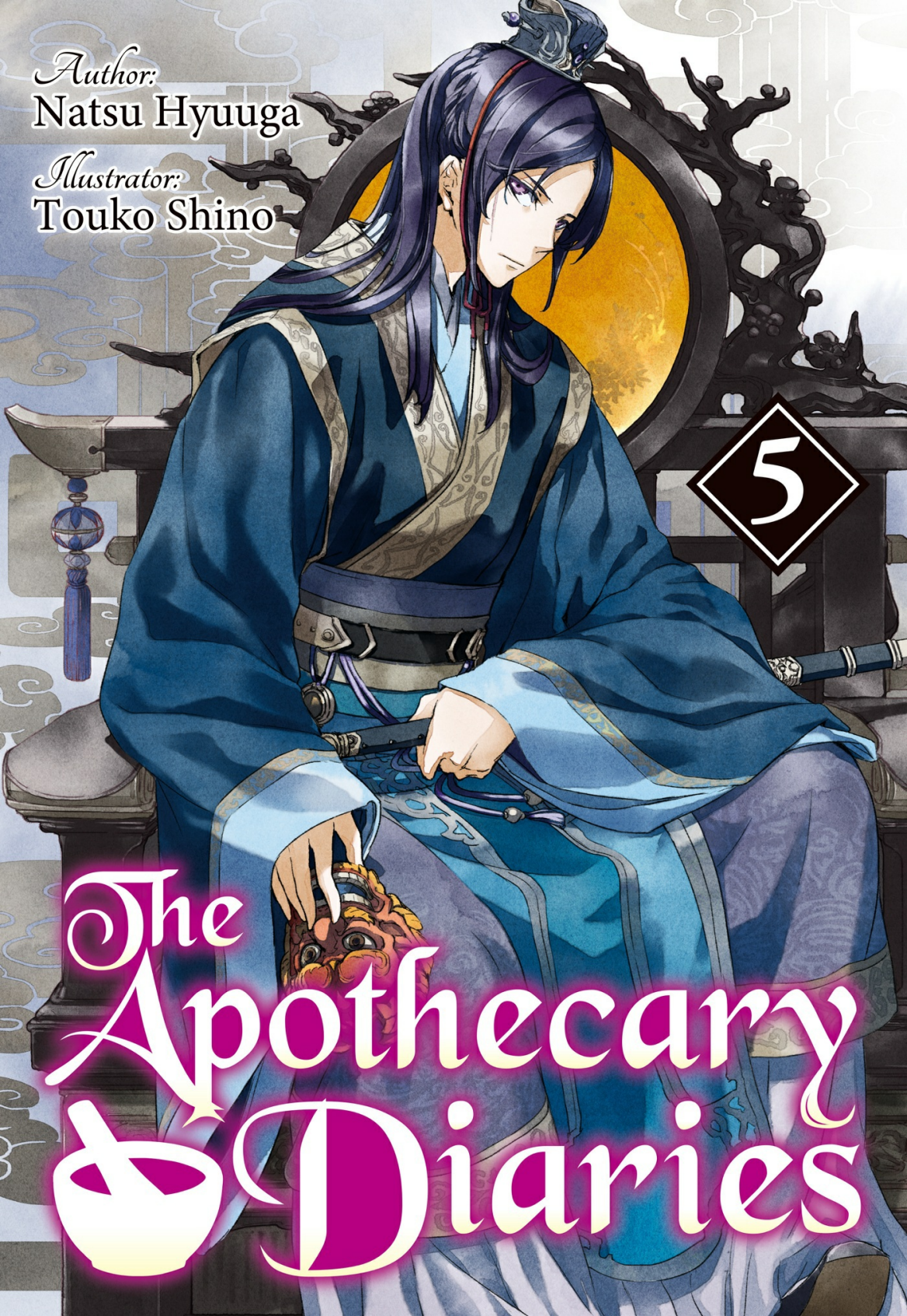
Author:
Natsu Hyuuga
Illustrator:
Touko Shino
5
The Apothecary Diaries

"Well," Lahan said, eyeing her. "They say clothes make the man, but apparently the same doesn't go for women. At least some of them."
"Shut up."
Maomao was dragging a heavy skirt behind her.
5
The Apothecary Diaries
Author
Natsu Hyuuga
Illustration
Touko Shino

Maomao, the cat, was at her feet. She, for one, seemed to know who Jinshi was, and occasionally cuddled up against his ankles.

Elsewhere in the room Jinshi was seated diagonally across from a middle-aged man of medium build.

Turning, she saw a courtesan looking wanton, leaning against the second-floor railing and smoking a pipe. It was Pairin, one of the Three Princesses. Her robe didn't do much to hide her abundant chest.

The White Lady proceeded to show them
a wide variety of intriguing entertainments.
She produced butterflies seemingly out
of thin air, and as they were flying away
they appeared to incinerate themselves,
turning to ash in mid-flight.

She took the damp kerchief and rubbed at his face. Jinshi closed his eyes and let her work, seemingly enjoying the feel of the warm, damp cloth.
"If you would, then. Remove it for now."

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

There's Mystery Everywhere!

Volume 5 of *The Apothecary Diaries* comes with a plus-sized helping of intriguing intrigues and pulse-pounding action! The mysteries seem to follow Maomao around, subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) related to each other. The food taster finds herself sucked into them, or sometimes just can't help sticking her nose in even when she really shouldn't.

Maomao's position is starting to shift bit by bit. There are those in court who are beginning to take notice of her. And is it possible the parallel lines that have always defined the relationship between her and Jinshi are starting to converge?!

The long-awaited fifth act begins!

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Character Profiles

Maomao
An apothecary in the pleasure district. Normally rather unemotional, she becomes a different person where medicines and poisons are concerned. Daughter of a courtesan and the military strategist Lakan.

Jinshi
Played the part of a eunuch in the rear palace, but his true identity is the Emperor's younger brother. Secrets surround his birth. So beautiful that some people claim that if he were a woman, he could bring the country to its knees.

Gaoshun
Formerly Jinshi's attendant and minder. Now that role is played by his son, and Gaoshun serves the Emperor personally.

Basen
Gaoshun's son; Jinshi's attendant.

Lakan
Maomao's father. An eccentric military strategist who wears a monocle. Extraordinarily capable, but not easy to deal with. He's up to his ears with love for his daughter, but Maomao hates him.

Lahan
Maomao's cousin. Actually the son of Lakan's half-brother, but Lakan has adopted him. Another eccentric.

Luomen
Maomao's granduncle and adoptive father; an extremely accomplished physician.

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Consort Lishu
One of the Emperor's four most favored consorts. Very young and still timid.

Ah-Duo
Formerly one of the Emperor's four favored consorts. She had a son with His Majesty. Once...

Suirei
Granddaughter of the former emperor, and a survivor of the otherwise exterminated Shi clan. Possesses knowledge as an apothecary.

Loulan
Also known as Shisui. Half-sister of Suirei. Formerly one of the Emperor's four favored consorts. A member of the Shi clan, she fled the rear palace, a serious crime. It's currently unknown if she's alive.

Empress Regnant
Mother of the previous emperor, grandmother of the current Emperor. A powerful woman who conducted politics in place of her son; however, dark rumors persist about her. Deceased.

The Former Emperor
A variety of ugly names for him circulate: he's called the Idiot Emperor, the Fool Prince, and a pedophile. Deceased.

Empress Gyokuyou
Hails from the west. Formerly one of the Emperor's four favored consorts, now his empress. Has one son and one daughter with the current Emperor; her son is the current heir apparent.

The Madam
The old lady who runs the Verdigris House, the brothel where Maomao has her shop. A real miser.

The Three Princesses
Pairin, Meimei, and Joka. The three most popular courtesans at the Verdigris

House.

Chou-u
A child survivor of the Shi clan. Because he was given the “resurrection drug,” half his body is paralyzed and he’s lost his memories of everything before he took the medicine.

Lihaku
A soldier-acquaintance of Maomao’s. Head over heels in love with Pairin.

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Prologue

"Geez, how are you gonna survive if that's all it takes to send you running?"

The voice was friendly enough, but its owner was looking down at him where he was collapsed on his knees on the ground. He could see the youthful figure on the fence, holding an apple. The figure took a bite of the hard fruit with a flash of white teeth. *Why?* thought the boy on the ground. He'd disappeared among the trees, eluded his pursuers—so why could this kid find him so easily?

"Shut up. I know that."

"Better go back, then. You've got the serving women crying." The youth chuckled.

So it had come to this: being looked down upon from the lofty heights of the fence. It made him so mad. *What about* you*?* he wanted to ask. Wearing a commoner's outfit, clambering on the fence like a monkey, munching on an apple. Forget crying—if the serving women saw *that*, they would faint.

"It's an important job. Just do it already." Monkey jumped down off the fence and stood in front of him, then mussed his hair—as if the kid had the right! Monkey was only a year older than him. He pushed the hand away, hating to be treated like a child. The other youth laughed and wiped the half-eaten apple on a sleeve, then held it out.

"Your leftovers?"

"Hey, you don't have to eat it."

There was a pause, then he grabbed the apple and bit into the side that didn't have any teeth marks in it. The crunchy fruit flooded his mouth with its flavor, simultaneously sweet and sour. He looked up to see the kid in the commoner's garb grinning at him.

"I want to at least choose my own partner," he said.

"Not likely! You get all the nicest stuff—what if you picked somebody awful? There would be a lot of unhappy people."

"She was older than my mother!"

“Er...yeah, I don’t know what to say about that,” Monkey said shyly, looking genuinely unsure.

He knew that. Yes, even he knew that much. But he was still a child, so acceptance didn’t come easily.

“Grow up,” Monkey said.

“You’re one to talk! You’re only a year older than me.” *What, you think that makes you a grown-up?* he wanted to ask. Did it mean Monkey would be able to go calmly along with a match like that?

All right, fine.

“I’ve decided,” he said.

“Decided what?”

He raised his finger, then pointed directly at the faux commoner.

“My partner for tonight.”

“Excuse me?” A sardonic smile, meant to hide embarrassment.

Chapter 1: Locusts

Morning was a lazy time in the pleasure district. These caged birds had been singing till dawn, and when the customers finally went home, the obsequious masks came off. For the brief time until the sun was high in the sky, they would sleep like logs.

Maomao left her little shack, yawning. In front of her, she could see steam rising from the Verdigris House—the menservants working hard to ready the morning baths, most likely. The chilly air prickled her skin—the sun was late in rising. Her simple cotton overgarment wasn't enough to keep her warm, and she rubbed her hands together, her breath fogging in front of her.

It had been a month since she'd left the rear palace, and the new year's celebrations had subsided. Her old man had stayed at the palace, hence why Maomao was here in the pleasure quarter.

Back in the shack, there was still a child sleeping—and Maomao resolved to leave him that way, knowing it was the only part of the day when he would be quiet. The boy's name was Chou-u; he was a survivor of the otherwise exterminated Shi clan, and currently he was living with Maomao. (Long story.) The little shit supposedly came from a decent background, but Maomao almost found herself wondering whether he was really a son of luxury. He was astonishingly adaptable, to the extent that he could lie there, snoring away, in that drafty old hovel.

Oh yeah, Grams wanted to see me, Maomao thought. She could get some hot water from the Verdigris House while she was at it. In weather like this, you couldn't go bathing in cold water. Shivering, Maomao stopped in front of the well and lowered the bucket, then started hauling it up again.

When she arrived at the Verdigris House, the courtesans had finished their baths and were having the apprentices dry their hair.

"Well, you're early today," said Meimei, her hair still glistening wet. She was one of the establishment's "Three Princesses," and also effectively Maomao's older sister. The most prominent courtesans bathed first, so she

was done already.

"Oh, hey, Sis. Do you know where Grams is?"

"The old lady's talking with the owner over there."

"Thanks."

It was the elderly madam who ran the day-to-day affairs of the Verdigris House, but she didn't own the place. The man who did stopped by about once a month to confer with the madam about the brothel, the courtesans, and anything else that might be on his mind. The owner was a man just entering old age, and he was totally overawed by the madam, who had known him since he was young. In fact, a few gossips whispered that he was the child of the madam and the last owner, but nobody knew the truth.

Running a brothel wasn't the man's only concern; he had other, more legitimate businesses as well, and at first glance he looked perfectly ordinary. He was such a soft touch that one wondered if he was really safe being a part of this world—and one worried for the brothel's affairs if the old madam should ever leave them.

"He's not here with another of his bizarre business ideas, is he?"

"Who can say?" Meimei shrugged expansively.

At that exact moment, the madam's voice boomed around the building: "You idiot! You complete, total, utter fool! What do you think you're doing?!"

The sisters looked at each other. "Guess you were right," Meimei said.

"Guess so."

What was the man up to this time?

A few minutes later, the madam emerged from an inner room. The nearly elderly man, looking thoroughly cowed, followed her. Everyone called him Mr. Owner. It was the only way to remember who actually did own the place. Considering the way Mr. Owner was rubbing his head, it looked like he'd gotten a good rap from the madam's knuckles.

"Oh, Maomao, you're here," the madam said.

"Yeah, Grams, I am. You asked me to come, remember?"

"Yes, of course."

Dammit, she forgot. Maomao was sure she had only said the words to herself, yet the next instant, she felt knuckles smacking into the top of her head. Sometimes she wondered if the old lady wasn't actually a mountain spirit who could read minds. Mr. Owner gave Maomao a look of sympathy.

He kind of reminds me of the quack...

If she was having a little déjà vu, maybe it was because the two men actually looked somewhat similar.

"I know that look. You want to take a bath. And have breakfast too, I suppose? Bring the kid with you."

"Someone's in a good mood."

"I do have my days," the old woman said, then all but strutted over toward the kitchen.

"I'll, uh, show myself out, then," Mr. Owner said, and promptly did just that. *Too bad*, Maomao thought, watching him go. *He usually stays for breakfast.*

No one said a word. Everyone in the dining area was struck dumb.

Finally Pairin, sitting beside Maomao, announced: "Awful." Her face was a scowl of disgust. She was considered one of the three most lovely flowers to bloom at the Verdigris House, but if any of her callers had seen her with that look on her face, all their fantasies would have been dashed.

As for Maomao, she looked like she'd found a maggot in her drinking water.

The table was long enough to seat about twenty people, and everyone had a bowl full of congee, another of soup, and a third small bowl, while three large trays were placed at intervals along the table. At the Verdigris House, meals usually consisted of a single bowl of soup, and maybe, if you were lucky, a modest side dish. Today the small bowls contained raw fish and pickled vegetables, while two of the trays had separate side dishes in them—a very generous breakfast by normal standards.

Something dark glinted on the trays. Bugs normally treated as pests in farmers' fields were here being served as food. Locusts.

"Grams, can you explain this?"

"Shut up and eat. It's a gift from Mr. Owner."

Maomao could well understand why the old lady was upset. Mr. Owner had other business concerns besides running this brothel—legitimate businesses that allowed him to hold his head high in polite company. But he could hardly be called a talented businessman.

"The harvest was bad this year. I guess they wept until he gave in." The madam angrily poured some black vinegar on her congee.

Mr. Owner dealt in crops. Farmers in this nation gave part of their harvest as tax, and the state purchased another part of the yield. Mr. Owner's business involved trading in what was left.

"I don't care if they cried their eyes out. What was he thinking, letting the seller dictate the price? *He* won't be able to sell this stuff either. And look at it all!" A mountain of fried locusts towered on the tray, seasoned as best as could be managed with soy paste and sugar. "He said he'd bought too much, that they wouldn't keep and would go to waste. Then he ought to just throw it out, instead of using *sugar* on it!"

Sugar was expensive! And here he'd cooked bugs in it. Who was going to eat that? No one, that's who. That's why he had so many left over—and how they had made their way to the Verdigris House's table.

Mr. Owner had considered eating the costs himself, so to speak, but he had another concern: he had a wife who didn't think highly of the Verdigris ladies' profession, and he had evidently chosen the madam's knuckle over his wife's rage.

Maomao scratched the back of her neck. She was used to less-than-refined food, but even she wasn't eager when confronted with this mountain of insects. After two or three of them, she would be ready to declare herself full. And the courtesans, far less accustomed to such base fare, frowned openly and refused to even touch the bugs.

"Hurry up and eat! You won't shut up about wanting side dishes; well, here you go. Five each—eat up," the old woman growled. Everyone looked at each other, and finally the first pair of chopsticks reached out toward the large dish.

Well, now. Maomao was surprised by the first person who put one of the locusts into their mouth. As they chewed on the bug, though, an unmistakable look of revulsion came over their face. "It's not very good. It's kind of...crunchy. Like it's empty."

This unvarnished assessment was given in a high-pitched voice—for it belonged to Chou-u. Maomao had been sure that the young lordling with his pampered upbringing would have resisted the idea of ever putting such food in his mouth, but apparently that wasn't the case. Maybe the loss of his memories had taken any aristocratic inhibitions with it, or maybe he'd actually eaten something like this before. Or perhaps it was simply a child's adaptability at work.

“Wow, I’m amazed you can stomach that,” said Pairin, who was sitting beside Maomao.

“It’s not great, but it’s not like you can’t eat it. It is *super* crunchy, though.”

Crunchy? That made some sense: you removed the innards of locusts before cooking them, so they were hollow on the inside. Hence Maomao really thought nothing of it as she reached for a locust and unenthusiastically took a bite.

Hrk?!

Yes, it was crunchy, all right. It seemed far more hollow on the inside than the locusts she’d had before, even though this one had been simmered. Maybe it was because the carapace was the only thing in her mouth, an outer layer even emptier than your average locust preparation.

Chou-u was busy bargaining with Pairin: “You want me to eat yours? I’ll help you out if you give me a mooncake.” Maomao got a firm grip on his head and shoved him down in his seat. “Ow! Owowowow!” Chou-u yelped.

Maomao took one of the locusts in her chopsticks and glowered at it. It was her bad habit: once something had gotten her interest, she simply couldn’t let it go.

“I want you to do a little shopping for me.”

After breakfast was over, the madam finally remembered why she’d summoned Maomao in the first place. She wanted to send her on an errand to the market that occupied the city’s central thoroughfare.

The courtesans weren’t allowed to leave the brothel, but the menfolk around here were too dense to trust with the shopping. There were a lot of strange and unusual products available at the market, but there were also a lot of con artists looking to rip you off. The market was a cheap place to sell things because one didn’t need to maintain a storefront, but by the same token, there was nothing to identify the bad actors and places to stay away from. You had to have your wits about you to find worthwhile purchases.

“I want you to get some incense. The usual stuff,” the old woman said. She meant the mild incense that was always burning in the entryway of the Verdigris House. It was a consumable, so she wanted to get it as cheaply as possible, but she couldn’t be burning low-quality stuff at the door to her establishment either.

“Yeah, sure. What’s it worth to you?” Maomao stuck out her hand, but the madam only smacked it away.

“Breakfast and bathwater for two people. Sound fair?”

Damn stingy old hag, Maomao thought, but she went.

“Heeey, Freckles! Buy me one of those!”

“Absolutely not.”

Chou-u was pointing to a stall full of toys as Maomao hauled him away, pulling him by the sleeve. She’d fully intended to do the shopping alone, but the little shit had thrown himself on the ground and begged and tantrumed until, in the end, she’d had to take him. Now she was walking through the market, dragging him along.

A single huge street cut through the center of the capital; carriages ran back and forth along it, and at the far end was the home of those who lived “above the clouds,” the palace. Every day, the street hosted a thriving market. To see the palace from here sometimes made Maomao feel as if she’d only dreamed that she had ever worked there. But the very fact that Chou-u was with her now was proof that she had lived within its walls—for that was why she’d found herself embroiled in the chain of events that had brought him to her.

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The Shi clan rebellion had impacted the market as well, to a point. The northern regions produced grain crops and timber products, and Maomao couldn't shake the sense that fewer places than usual were selling such things. Instead, she saw a lot of the dried fruits and textiles that came from the south and west.

There was something else too—something that brought a scowl to Maomao's face when she saw it: simmered insects for sale. Locusts again.

"I guarantee that stuff sucks! Who would actually buy it?" Chou-u said, causing Maomao to slap her hand over his mouth and drag him away, the stall owner glaring fearsomely at them as they went. "What'd I do?" Chou-u demanded. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Just shut up," Maomao said, looking at him almost as grimly as the shopkeeper had. This, she thought, was why she hated children.

"Hollow shells like that are never going to be good." Then Chou-u said, more quietly, "Man, so much for the harvest this year."

Maomao blinked. "Wait... What did you say?"

"Uh, that that stuff's gonna suck?"

"No, no, after that."

Chou-u looked at her curiously. "That the harvest is toast this year?"

"Yes! How do you know that?"

"Um... Uh... How *do* I know that?" Chou-u scratched his head with his right hand; his left hung limply at his side, spasming occasionally. For Chou-u had died once and come back to life, and it had left him partially paralyzed and without most of his memories. "I don't remember. I just remember hearing that when the bugs are crunchy, it means the harvest will be bad."

He held his head, *hmm*ing thoughtfully. Maomao wondered if a good shake might bring something back, but he was technically on loan to her, so she didn't want to be *too* rough with him. If what Chou-u was saying was true, though, it could be a serious matter. She smacked him on the forehead, just hard enough to keep him from getting any stupider. He puffed out his cheeks in protest.

"You know, I think I *might* be able to remember," he said.

"Really?" Maomao asked, and Chou-u quickly looked around at the nearby shops.

"Yeah! If you buy me something, I'll remember!" he said, looking perfectly satisfied with himself.

Maomao didn't say anything, but pulled the corners of Chou-u's mouth as far apart as they would go. In the dumb gap in his front teeth, a new tooth could just be seen coming in.

Once a little shit, always a little shit, Maomao thought. *Remember, my ass*.

Chou-u was drawing happily despite the lump on his head. To Maomao's surprise he had wanted not some sort of toy, but paper and a brush. She'd agreed to let him use one of her brushes, but the paper had ended up being surprisingly expensive. Maybe something of his decent upbringing remained with him, because he could tell the difference between low-grade paper and the fancy stuff. He'd gone around the shop, mumbling, "This is no good," and, "That's no good," until he found the most expensive paper on display.

Of course, Maomao wasn't about to let him boss her around like that, and instead picked something which, although not as nice, was perfectly usable. Paper was expensive for a consumable, but not impossibly so. She hoped that as it became more common, it would also get cheaper. Chou-u looked so happy clutching his sheaf of paper that she decided to forgive him with just a single knuckle to the head.

Chou-u had been drawing busily since they'd gotten back to the Verdigris House. He was in the shop with Maomao, where she was busy making the abortifacients and cold medicines she'd been asked for. She'd been told to keep him close so he wouldn't cause trouble for the apprentices (some of whom were about his age) or the courtesans.

When she came back from delivering the medicines to a nearby brothel, she discovered a crowd at the entrance to the Verdigris House. Courtesans, apprentices, and even some of the menservants were there.

What's going on? she wondered, squinting to see better—whereupon she discovered that the crowd had formed around her obnoxious brat. Wondering what he had done this time, she hurried over to him, the crowd parting until she was standing in front of the little shit. She discovered a piece of white paper with lines dancing across it.

"Don't cut, Freckles. You have to wait in line like everyone else."

"What are you doing?"

Chou-u was sitting with a flat board in lieu of a table, drawing a picture. In front of him, a courtesan sat in a chair, looking as calm and composed as

she could.

"Can't you tell? I'm drawing a picture." The brush ran fluidly over the page, producing something resembling the woman in the chair, if more beautiful. "There! All done." Chou-u left the brush in the pot of ink and gave the paper a few good shakes. The face of his "model" broke into a smile and she said, "Well, now!" as she pulled out her wallet and gave him five coins—and not small ones.

"Pleasure doing business," Chou-u said, tucking the money into the folds of his robe. The sum was considerably more than some kid's pocket change.

"Ooh, I'm next," one of the menservants said, sitting in the chair. Wasn't he supposed to be on guard duty or something? What was he doing playing around here? If the madam saw him, he'd be in for it.

"Aw, sorry, mister. I'm all out of paper. I'm gonna go buy some more right now, though, so stop by tomorrow, okay?"

"Bullshit! I've been waiting all day!"

"*Really* sorry, sir. I'll do you first thing tomorrow. I'll make you look extra manly!"

He was pretty good at this. Chou-u slipped away from the crowd and started hurrying toward the paper shop. Maomao recalled buying him a sheaf of ten sheets—and it was already gone? At least three of the people standing around appeared to be holding portraits; at his prices, that would already be enough to recoup the investment in materials.

Who knew he had a talent like that? Maomao thought, scratching the back of her neck and stealing a peek at the page a nearby courtesan was holding.

"You louts! What're you doing?!" The sound of the madam's raspy voice was enough to banish the burble of friendly chatter and turn all the faces pale. "Hurry and start getting the place ready! You want the customers to run away?"

There was the madam, brandishing a broom. The courtesans and apprentices and menservants scattered like baby spiders. Maomao was about to make tracks for her own place when she was grabbed by a skeletal hand.

"What is it, Grams?"

"You know damn well what it is! It's that kid! You might have agreed to take him in and you might be getting a stipend to support him, but you can't just let him do whatever he wants!"

"You're the one getting all the money, Grams."

Yes, for some reason it was the old lady who kept all the funds that came in. It had something to do with the fact that Chou-u was, to an extent, given free rein of the Verdigris House. But a man—even a child—couldn't be allowed to actually live in the brothel, yet neither could he be housed in the menservants' longhouse. By process of elimination, he was put up in Maomao's shack.

"He's using my facilities. He owes me a cut of the profits. I'll let it go at ten percent."

Greedy old hag.

Maomao didn't think she'd said the words out loud, yet mysteriously, she found a knuckle cracking down on her head.

"You, clean up that brush and inkpot."

"Why me?"

"Don't question me. Just do it. Or it's locust soup tomorrow."

Hag! Maomao thought, but she sullenly began to clean up, pressing one hand to her head all the while.

When Chou-u got back to their shack that evening, Maomao looked at him in a way that showed she was not pleased.

"Freckles, where's my brush?"

"No brushes for boys who don't clean up after themselves." Maomao pointedly turned her back on him and put some wood in the cookstove.

"Don't be stingy with me!"

"If I'm stingy, I learned it from the madam." Maomao stirred the congee in the clay pot on the stove, tasting a sip of it. She concluded it was a little bland and added some salt. "Who, by the way, says she's going to charge you for using her place."

"I know! I'm gonna do my portraits somewhere else from now on."

That caused Maomao to frown. She perched the ladle in the soup pot, then went over and stood in front of Chou-u, who was lounging on the rush mat on the floor. She crouched down and looked at him.

"What?!"

"You stay close to the Verdigris House. I don't care if she charges you for it. You're not to get too far away from the guards. And no more going by yourself to buy paper."

"Hey, I can do what I want." He tried to look pointedly away from her,

but Maomao grabbed his head and forced him to look in her eyes.

"Yes, you can do what you want. *If* you don't mind ending up as a lump of meat."

"Lump of meat?" Chou-u looked at her.

She wasn't joking. The Verdigris House was boisterous and friendly, but this was still the pleasure district, and the seamy underbelly of the capital was always near at hand. Maomao pointed out the window of the shack. "You'll end up with the likes of her."

The light of a lantern could be seen almost floating through the evening darkness. It was held by a woman, who was hooded and carrying a rush mat. She looked ordinary—at first. But then Chou-u caught his breath and stood abruptly. He must have noticed that this night-walker had no nose. She had no proper home, either, but could only take customers by the roadside. Women like her, the lowest of the whores, were often physically ravaged by sexual diseases. The woman outside didn't look long for this world—but if she wanted her next meal, she would have to find a man to service.

What was she doing around here? Maybe Maomao's old man, good-hearted as he was, had given her medicine once; or maybe she was looking for the leftovers from some other brothel. Whatever it was, Maomao thought, it was causing trouble for her.

"This isn't a nice place," she said. "It doesn't matter if you're some little kid. There are people out there who would line up to kill you if they knew you had a few coins."

In other words, if he didn't want to die, he would do as she said. Chou-u pursed his lips a little, but nodded, his eyes brimming with tears.

"You understand? Then hurry up and eat your dinner and go to bed." Maomao went back and stood in front of the stove again, where she resumed stirring the congee.

Chou-u was already up when Maomao woke the next morning. She could hear him bustling around, and looked up to discover the tabletop covered in paper. Chou-u was working his brush vigorously.

That little shit...

He was using the brush and inkpot she'd hidden from him. Maomao got up, about to give him a taste of her knuckle, when one of the pages came drifting down off the table.

Hm? Curious, she picked it up. It showed a bug drawn in precise detail. In fact, it was almost too real; it made her a little squeamish to look at. *Brings back memories.* It made her think of the young serving woman—no, the consort—who had loved insects. That young woman, Shisui, had done drawings like this too. Maomao felt a pang at the thought.

Suddenly, Chou-u stood up. "Done!" he said, presenting her with a piece of paper. "I finished, Freckles!"

"Finished what?"

"This! Right here!" He fluttered the paper at her, looking downright proud of himself. It showed two subtly different bugs. "I had a little trouble remembering exactly, but I think this is it. I think this is what I saw with the thing that talked about bad harvests." Luckily, his pictures spoke far more articulately than he did; they were very clear. "This is your normal locust. And here on the bottom is a locust from when there's going to be a bad harvest."

The two locusts showed legs of different lengths, and although it was hard to tell in an ink drawing, the richness of their coloration might have been different too.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Pretty sure. It sort of came to me in bits and pieces."

Chou-u was still largely amnesiac, but apparently he was recovering bits of his memory. That could be highly inconvenient depending on what he remembered, but it might prove very important too.

Two types of locust. Maomao would have to find out more about this. A plague of insects could destroy an entire nation when they ate all its crops. Insects were always a threat to crops, but plague was something else altogether. The bugs would devour anything and everything; in bad cases, they might even eat hempen ropes and straw sandals. Maomao didn't know what caused such events, but they happened at least every few decades. By good luck, no such thing had occurred since the accession of the current Emperor.

Some people insisted this was because the current Emperor's rule was humane and enlightened, thus heaven saw no need to send plague. But Maomao didn't believe that for a second. It was just happenstance that there hadn't been any plagues of insects. That meant, though, that if and when such a plague occurred, it would be a chance to test the Emperor's power. He had

only recently punished the Shi clan, the most powerful in the land. The timing could hardly have been worse: if a plague of locusts occurred now, many people would assume it was a heavenly rebuke for the destruction of the Shi.

Bah. Not my problem. Nothing to do with me, Maomao thought. No, it was nothing to do with her—but she was already moving.

Almost before she knew what she was doing, Maomao was heading for a particular bookstore.

No way they'll have it...

Chou-u's detailed drawings had reminded her: she'd seen such illustrations before. She walked among the shops until she reached one that was particularly gloomy and moldy-smelling. A bell chimed as she entered, and the owner, resting within like a piece of the furniture, nodded to her. That was as much civility as he was prepared to offer, after which he appeared to go back to sleep. The place looked deserted, bereft of customers, but she knew his purse must be comfortably full these days.

He supplies books to the rear palace, after all...

Most of the stock was either used books or for rental. There were a few brand-new items for sale, but not many. If you wanted something new, you would probably have to order it. The shop owner left these business matters largely to his children, living an almost hermetic life himself.

They're not going to have it.

This shop specialized in popular fiction and erotic illustrations; not what one would call refined material. Maomao had come here nonetheless, because sometimes one could make unexpected finds in shops like this...

Almost as soon as she got inside, she rubbed her eyes. What was going on here? She frowned. What was this, some convenient plot twist? She pointed to a book sitting on a pile on a desk. "Hey, mister, can I have a look at that?"

"Mmm," the shopkeeper grunted; Maomao took it for permission and picked up the book. It was thick and heavy, and the cover depicted a bird.

This is ridiculous. In fact, it seemed impossible. And yet, there it was. The book was filled with pictures of birds accompanied by descriptions, and there were handwritten marginal notes peppering the pages. "What's the story with this thing?"

"Hrm? Got it in yesterday." The clerk didn't sound very excited. More

like he wished she would stop interrupting his nap.

"Did you get anything else in along with it?"

"Only the one. But the guy said he would come back, I think."

Maomao's face began to sparkle. This was the second time she had held this book. Yes, it was exactly the same one she'd seen back then. Back in the chamber where she'd been confined. It was one of the books she'd been given as research material on the elixir of immortality—and here it was in her hands.

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Chapter 2: Ukyou

Maomao wondered how this could be. Shishou's stronghold was supposed to have been sealed off; it made no sense for something from *there* to be *here*. Even if the clan's possessions had been moved out of the fortress, the fact that she had found one of them here in this marketplace implied some shady dealings somewhere along the line.

Hrrmm.

Well, if that was the game that was afoot, then Maomao had an idea.

She found the culprit quickly. And how? It was really quite simple.

"Young lady, you can't call me all the way out here just for something like this."

The annoyed speaker was Lihaku, and despite his complaint, he was eagerly trying to get a good look at the Verdigris House. They were in Maomao's apothecary shop, Lihaku's considerable bulk making the place feel even more cramped than usual.

"I don't have time to go chasing after petty thieves," Lihaku added, glancing toward the ceiling of the atrium, hoping to catch a glimpse of a countenance like a blossoming flower. Specifically, of Pairin, one of the Three Princesses of the Verdigris House.

Lihaku, a soldier and acquaintance of Maomao's, was head over heels in love with Pairin. Coming to a brothel, however, took money—so Maomao, as a friend of Pairin's, knew that Lihaku would come running whenever she might have a request to make of him. And today, her request was this: that he keep an eye out in the market for any stolen goods that might be circulating. Specifically, books.

Encyclopedias were unusual; if one had been stolen, it would be easy to trace when it was sold. And because the thief might go to any number of shops besides the used-book place Maomao had visited, she wanted Lihaku to be on the alert.

"Hah! Well, you'll be glad to know I've been watching the place all

morning."

"You didn't ask one of your subordinates to do it?" Apparently he'd been so set on making a good impression that he'd handled the matter himself. Given that it was still the cold season, it was a pretty good effort to stake a place out.

Lihaku handed Maomao a package. A gift of rice dumplings. He accompanied it with another glance toward the atrium. He seemed to be suggesting that he and Maomao should have tea together—and that she should call Pairin to snack with them. But Maomao still needed something from him first.

"Where's your captive?"

"Out front. One of your guys is watching him."

"Ah."

Maomao looked out the window to see two of the brothel's guards standing on either side of an emaciated, beardless man. He was wearing fairly heavy clothes—in fact, Maomao recognized the cotton-padded jacket. It was dusty and obviously hadn't been washed in days, but she knew it.

Well, now... Where had she seen him before?

"Hey!" Lihaku called, but Maomao ignored him; she put on her shoes and headed toward the men. Flanked by the two large guards, the thief looked smaller than he actually was.

"Don't get any closer. He's dangerous," one of the guards, a long-serving manservant, said, catching Maomao by the collar. She hated being handled like a cat, but this was how it had always been, ever since she was little. She didn't bother squirming away, but only looked at the thief.

He didn't say anything. She didn't say anything. But their eyes met, and he studied her face for a second—and then he went pale. He opened his mouth, and what should he say but, "Snake girl!" He shouted so loud, he sprayed flecks of spittle.

"Hey, I think you mean *cat* girl," the guard said teasingly. The other one laughed.

Oooh, Maomao fumed.

She didn't have much memory for faces, and the man's appearance was altered by his hollow cheeks, but she was almost sure he had been at the fortress. He was the one who had been guarding her room, the one who had helped her escape from the torture chamber. The one who had interrupted her

delicious meal of snake meat.

At least it makes sense now, she thought. When he'd told her to run, that it was dangerous, he'd looked like someone who'd just looted a burning building. Since he'd been guarding her room, it would have been a simple matter for him to snatch the books out of it.

"What's the matter, young lady?" Lihaku arrived on the scene and looked at the man, who trembled visibly. If they found out he was a runaway from that fortress, they'd treat him as something much worse than a thief.

Hmm. Maybe, Maomao thought, she could use that to her advantage. "I'm sorry, sir. He's an acquaintance of mine."

"*Huh?*" Lihaku said, taken aback by the bluntness of Maomao's declaration. She smirked at the criminal.

Lihaku was clearly dubious, but when Maomao produced some snacks and called Pairin, he quickly went off wagging his tail. And so it was that Maomao was left in the apothecary's shop: herself, the thief, and...

"Y'know, you don't really have to be here," she said, shooting a withering look at the long-serving manservant. Everyone else had gone on tea break, but this man had insisted on following Maomao. He'd cleverly helped himself to a handful of dumplings.

"'Fraid I can't leave you two alone. If anything were to, ahem, *happen*, I'd catch hell from 'Mr. Fox' *and* 'Mr. Mask.'" The fox referred to the monocled strategist, while the mask was presumably Jinshi, who covered his face whenever he came here. Even with his scar, he was still a valuable jewel of a man. His looks would make him stand out, and his position only complicated things. "Don't worry about it," the manservant added. "I'm just sitting here, eating dumplings. I won't hear a thing."

So saying, he went and sat by the wall. He was in his forties, and had been around the Verdigris House since before Maomao was born. He had earned the madam's trust by always doing things diligently and accurately. His name was Ukyou.

He'll squeal to the old lady. I just know it. In other words, she would have to restrict this conversation to things she would be comfortable with the madam knowing about. *Stuff that won't get us in trouble if she finds out...*

Maomao looked at the man sitting across from her. Two books lay on the table between them: the one Maomao had found at the used-book store and

the one the thief had intended to sell today. “What happened to the rest of the books?” she asked.

The man refused to look at her, like a recalcitrant child. It wasn’t a good look for a full-grown man.

I don’t have time for this. If he’d sold them at other shops, someone else might already have bought them. Maomao slammed a fist down on the table. “That soldier we saw? He was part of the assault on the stronghold,” she said, quietly, slowly. “Are you saying you don’t care if I tell him you were there?”

The man’s color got even worse. Maomao hated to threaten him after he’d helped her, but this was no time for scruples. She needed to know where those books had gone.

Ukyou munched thoughtfully on a dumpling, taking his time with each mouthful. He might look easygoing, but if things got physical, he was clearly strong enough to overpower the likes of this guy.

The man frowned, fighting with himself, but in the end he bowed his head, defeated. “I still have three of the other volumes. Two of them I sold in another town, and the rest I left.”

Assuming the fire from the explosions hadn’t reached Maomao’s room, it might still be possible to get their hands on those last volumes. That meant the real problem was those two books he’d sold. The ones on the table had to do with birds and fish, respectively.

“Did you sell the one about bugs?”

“No, I’ve got one of them still.”

One of them? That piqued Maomao’s curiosity. The volume about birds had a number on it. If there was a *I*, there must be a *II*.

“Can you get it to me, immediately?”

“Can you promise you won’t sell me out?”

“Depends if you’re willing to cooperate,” Maomao pressed. Ukyou, who had been reclining by the wall, could be heard to sigh deeply. “Come on, Maomao. Now you’re just threatening him.” He arranged himself on the cramped floor of the shop and gave the man a friendly smack on the shoulder. “Listen, you must be hungry, right? Looks like you’ve been through a lot. Why not relax?”

The thief didn’t say anything. Ukyou, meanwhile, simply left the shop. He was soon back holding a tray with a bowl of rice and a side dish. The side dish was nothing more than the leftover stewed locusts, but no sooner had

Ukyou offered the man chopsticks than the thief took them. Maomao was surprised by the man's enthusiasm.

Ukyou slapped her on the shoulder. "Not there yet." The thief, virtually obsessed with his meal, didn't even look at them. Ukyou dropped his voice and said to her, "Just look at him. I think he had a hard road to the capital. Maybe he did sell the books, but it looks like it was either that or starve. The books themselves seem to have been treated well. I don't think he's a bad person."

"You might be right..." Maomao said, but she was absolutely dying to know what had happened to the other books.

"You have to know when to use the carrot and when to use the stick."

"I *know* that, dammit." If the old madam was the stick of the Verdigris House, this man seemed to be the carrot. He wasn't notably tall, and his face looked like that of any other middle-aged man, but it was his decency that endeared him to the courtesans.

Suddenly, the thief stopped shoveling food into his mouth. Ukyou looked at him with curiosity. "What's the matter?"

"This is awful."

"You don't like locusts?"

"This ain't a locust," the man said, holding one of the bugs in his chopsticks.

"Isn't it?"

"They might call everything a locust around here, but farmers make a distinction."

"What sort of distinction?" Maomao and Ukyou looked closely at the man. He went to work on the mountain of stewed bugs, picking them up one at a time and taking a bite, then separating them into piles. The ratio between the two ended up at close to eight to one.

"These are locusts. Farmers stew 'em and eat 'em. But these, these are grasshoppers. They look alike, but grasshoppers taste terrible."

"Are they really that different?" Ukyou asked. He'd never realized the two were so distinct. Nor had Maomao; she'd always mentally classified them together.

"Take a bite, and you'll figure it out. When you pull off the legs and stew them, they all come out the same color, so the less scrupulous sell them to ignorant merchants. Grasshoppers give real locusts a bad name."

Ah ha. Mr. Owner would have made the perfect mark for a scam like that. With just one locust for every eight grasshoppers, of course the resulting dish was terrible. Maomao took a locust and put it in her mouth. The thief wasn't wrong: it had more body and a better flavor.

The man gave the grasshoppers a grim look. Before Maomao could speak, though, Ukyou said, "If there's something going on, tell us."

The man said, "There might be a famine this year."

At that, Maomao practically jumped toward him. "You think so too?!"

"H-Hey, now, I can't be sure. But when you get a lot more grasshoppers than locusts in a year, it usually means a plague of insects the next season."

It was a simple matter of the ratio between the two. And it accorded well with what Chou-u had said. Maomao gave the man another look. "You seem awfully knowledgeable about bugs for a guard. I also seem to remember that room had plenty of things in it more obviously valuable than a set of encyclopedias, yet you went for the books. Why not just leave them?" Wouldn't a thief normally choose something easier to pawn?

The man scratched the back of his neck, somewhat abashed. "I actually, uh, didn't want to sell the encyclopedias."

"But you told the bookseller you'd be back with more later."

"You have to schmooze with those types, otherwise you can't get a decent price. Besides, I was hoping to come buy it back if I could scare up the money. I mean, nobody would voluntarily buy an encyclopedia."

Ahem... Someone *would*, Maomao wanted to say, but she stopped the words before they came out.

The man obviously had only the clothes on his back to his name. It was still winter, so that was fine as far as it went, but his face was grimy; he was so dirty that Maomao had somewhat balked at letting him into the apothecary shop. In any case, he wouldn't find it easy to earn much money looking like that.

"The guy who used to live in confinement, back at the stronghold. I was the one who brought him his meals." Maomao's eyes widened; this was unexpected. "I guess they brought him there to make some kind of new drug or something, but that wasn't the only thing he was researching."

"What else was there?"

"This, right here," the man said—indicating the grasshopper.

"You mean how to prevent a plague?"

So that was what her predecessor had been trying to discover. Maomao swallowed heavily and was about to press the man further when there was a great crash and the door of the shop flew open.

"Hey, Freckles! Can I eat your dumplings or what?"

It was Chou-u, holding a skewer of dumplings in each hand.

The thief blinked several times. "Wha? Young Mas—"

Before he could get the words out, Maomao grabbed some medicine she'd been pulverizing and flung it into the man's open mouth.

"Ugh! That's bitter!" He practically convulsed. She felt bad for him, but he had been about to say something extremely inconvenient for all of them. She'd do it again if she had to.

I should have realized... Of course he would know about Chou-u. He'd said the whole reason he'd helped her was because Chou-u had asked him to. Publicly, the Shi clan had been destroyed root and branch. The fact that one of them was actually right here was bad, bad news.

Chou-u watched the man flail with evident amusement. He seemed to wonder what this ridiculous stranger was doing.

"Yeah, sure, eat the stupid dumplings," Maomao said. "Just go away."

"Don't shoo me! What am I, a house pet?" Chou-u complained. He must not have recognized the man, because he paid him no mind.

"Hey, Chou-u, how about I let you ride on my shoulders?"

"Whoa, really? Awesome! Let me up!"

Maomao was grateful to Ukyou for his well-judged distraction.

I can't be sure...but I ought to let him know, at least, Maomao thought, and crooked her fingers, counting the days until Jinshi would visit again.

Chapter 3: Sleep

Three days later, a masked noble appeared at the apothecary shop as the sun was crossing the meridian.

"Welcome! Thank goodness you're here!"

Jinshi was set back on his heels by Maomao's warm greeting. Behind him, Gaoshun's mouth hung open; he was clearly wondering what had happened.

"H-Hey, what's the matter?"

"Xiaomao, you *do* know that that's Master Jinshi before you, right? You don't have him confused with someone else, do you?"

Maomao scowled. Ridiculous reactions, both. Gaoshun glanced at Jinshi, knowing he'd accidentally let the wrong name slip, and was greeted with an annoyed look from behind the mask.

Jinshi entered the shop and seated himself on a round cushion. The place wasn't exactly spacious, so Gaoshun retreated to the front room of the Verdigris House, as he always did. Once the sliding door was closed, Jinshi finally removed his mask.

There, as ever, was his beautiful face, and the scar along his cheek that never failed to look out of place. The stitches had been removed and it looked far less painful than before, but even so, it was enough to make a person sigh with regret for the sheer wastefulness of it.

People had started writing entertaining tales of the last year's rebellion of the Shi clan. The hero was the Emperor's beautiful younger brother, and the villain was played by Loulan. One might expect the latter role to go to Shishou, the leader of the Shi clan, but Loulan had displaced him in the popular imagination, and that scar, one might suppose, was the reason.

The villainess who had injured this unearthly face would be spoken of for generations to come. When Maomao remembered the bug-loving palace lady, laughing merrily, she found it gave her a desolate feeling.

"I thought you had something you wanted to tell me," Jinshi said.

Oh! Yes, I did.

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Maomao took the encyclopedia she'd bought down from the bookshelf.

"What's this?"

"Some opportunist plucked it from the flames of the stronghold and sold it."

She would keep quiet about the former guard for the time being. He was under the care of the Verdigris House's chief manservant, Ukyou, who would know what to do with him.

The man who had fled the fortress had decided to start calling himself Sazen. Maomao had wanted him to use an assumed name just on the off chance his real one caused the little brat, Chou-u, to remember his past. Luckily enough, "Sazen" seemed to have no special attachment to his former name. Now he was learning the business from Ukyou.

We were able to recover the books he sold.

Ukyou had acted immediately to gather them up. Sazen said he'd sold them to a procurer with whom Ukyou happened to be acquainted, so the chief manservant talked to the other man and bought the books from him. Meaning there was just one problem left.

"I think the last of these books is at the fortress. And I want to get my hands on it."

Jinshi gave her a look. "And why are we collecting these books?"

Maomao decided the best answer to that question was a practical demonstration. She placed a bowl of food in front of Jinshi with a none-too-elegant *thonk*: a mountain of stewed bugs of a rather unappealing color. Jinshi frowned openly and backed away. "What in the world are those?"

"Stewed locusts. Although the chief ingredient is actually grasshoppers." Maomao picked one up in her chopsticks and leaned toward Jinshi. He backed away again, but soon found himself stymied by the wall, where he simply crumpled.

"I'm not eating that!"

"No one said anything about eating it."

Maomao put the grasshopper on a plate and took out a piece of paper with a picture of two insects on it: a comparative study of a locust and a grasshopper. It had been based on the fried versions, but it captured the essentials. She'd given Chou-u some pocket change for the work.

"It seems grasshoppers proliferated last year. Weren't there any complaints from the farming villages about damage from insects?"

Jinshi's face clouded, and he scratched his head with a sigh. "Yes, we had some reports. There was significant damage to farms in the northern region."

Not enough to cause starvation, though. For better or worse, autumn the year before had been cold, helping to take care of the bugs. They were wiped out before they could increase uncontrollably.

"Devastation from locusts can continue for several years. What do you plan to do this year?"

Jinshi's mouth twisted. Maybe the question had already occurred to him.

The northern region had, Maomao suspected, largely belonged to the Shi clan. With them gone, responsibility for governing the area would fall on the Emperor.

"We're planning to cover for last year's shortfall by distributing some of the excess from the south." But they hadn't yet, it seemed, planned further ahead than that. Jinshi had a furrow in his brow worthy of Gaoshun.

"If it happens again this year, things are going to be hard," Maomao said.

People would claim that the plague was a sign that the Emperor was not ruling the country properly. *They're just bugs*, you might think, but such plagues had spelled the end of more than one nation in history. And for this to come the very year after the Emperor had destroyed the Shi clan—what would the people make of that?

Ridiculous superstition, Maomao thought—but in the minds of many, the connection couldn't be dismissed so easily. And the Emperor and his relatives had to rule the credulous as well as the skeptical.

"Insect plague is a natural phenomenon," Jinshi said. "What are we supposed to do about it? Set up bonfires to draw them off? Or should we go out and swat every single one individually?" He was right, of course. Such an endeavor would be futile.

"That's why I'm looking into this," Maomao said, holding the encyclopedia out toward Jinshi. This was the volume she'd gotten from Sazen, the runaway from the stronghold. The book was thoroughly annotated in the margins. "There's another volume dealing with insects, and since it's not here, I think it might be back at the stronghold." The volume in Maomao's possession said nothing about grasshoppers, yet it was unimaginable that such a common insect would go unremarked upon in such a thorough book. "Also, I believe the apothecary who was at the stronghold before me was researching something about grasshoppers."

“Truly?”

“Yes, although I don’t know how far his research got.” Only that it had been desperate.

Jinshi stroked his chin thoughtfully, then opened the door and called for Gaoshun—who was just putting a skewer of dumplings in his mouth. He immediately went to summon one of the menservants from the Verdigris House. Chou-u, never one to miss an opportunity, spotted the abandoned dumplings and helped himself.

“I should be able to procure it within a few days.”

“I would appreciate that.” Maomao let out a long breath. This didn’t mean things were over, but it did bring some relief for something that had been swirling in her mind for some days now.

Jinshi, however, looked pale. He often seemed fatigued recently, now that he could no longer pretend to be a eunuch. And what Maomao had said had only added to his workload.

“Tired, sir?”

“You could say that. But I’ll be fine.”

He had big bags under his eyes, but the officials and court ladies around him didn’t seem to notice them. In fact, they seemed to think he was fine. Even with a scar on his face, his beauty was still virtually superhuman, and that threw people off. They seemed to take it for the bloom of health.

He’s going to collapse at this rate. People whose senses became dulled by fatigue eventually ceased to understand even that they *were* fatigued. If even Gaoshun were to insist that Jinshi was fine, there would be nothing she could do to stop any of it. *He needs some sleep.*

If he had the time to come all the way out here, he should have spent it resting in his room instead. Maomao looked at him with some exasperation. “Master Jinshi, wouldn’t you like to rest?”

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

“I’ll prepare a bedroom immediately. I want you to sleep.”

Maomao was looking right at him, and it was impossible to avoid noticing the scar on his right cheek. She realized she was at risk of wanting to study the neat stitching in detail, and dropped her gaze to the ground. Of course she would want to have a good look at her old man’s handiwork, the careful stitches covered with ointment. Jinshi would most likely be stuck with the scar, but the healing process would go quickly, and she wished she could

observe its progress.

"You want me to sleep in a place like this?"

Maomao ventured a bit of a joke: "Can't sleep on your own?" Thinking maybe he would resent being spoken to like a child, though, she started to add, "That's a j—"

"No. No, I can't," Jinshi said before she could finish. It seemed he got lonely by himself.

I get it. Maomao popped her head out the door of the shop and called to a nearby apprentice, asking her in turn to call the madam.

"What is it?" the old lady asked, not very enthusiastically, when she arrived. But when Maomao explained what she wanted, a light started to shine under those baggy old eyelids. "Give me half an hour."

Is that really enough time? Maomao thought, but she proceeded to leave the madam, who suddenly seemed quite invested, to her own devices. Instead she offered Jinshi some restorative tea.

"This way, please," Maomao said, directing Jinshi into the Verdigris House. She led him to a room on the top floor, a chamber appointed with the finest furnishings and a very large bed. Incense was burning, filling the space with a rich, sweet scent. "You may rest here, sir. Work is important, but you must take care of yourself."

She'd half expected the madam to simply shoot her down, but the old lady seemed to have had some sort of plan, for she offered the establishment's best room for free. And she'd gotten it ready in thirty minutes. An impressive display. Maybe she'd figured it would be best to make a good impression on a member of the nobility.

"If you want to bathe, a medicinal bath is ready for you. If you'd like pajamas, you can use these." Maomao handed him a set of soft cotton sleepwear. Jinshi looked surprised at first, but his smile grew progressively more gentle. It wasn't the smile of a celestial nymph, but it could still have melted the heart of any woman—or man.

"I believe I shall bathe," Jinshi said, heading for the adjoining bath. The tub, filled with hot water painstakingly brought by the menservants, would be the perfect temperature. How they must have struggled, first to boil it and then to bring it here before it cooled!

Maomao felt a wave of relief, and it seemed like the furrow in Gaoshun's

brow—he was in a corner of the room—softened as well. And yet he also seemed uneasy.

"I shan't be sleeping alone," Jinshi reiterated.

"No you shan't, sir."

On that count, at least, there would be no question. Jinshi opened the door to the bath with an inscrutable expression—and then immediately slammed it shut again and scuttled back to Maomao in a tizzy. His scurrying looked somehow comical. He was wearing his mask again.

"Why are there scantily clad women in the bath?" he demanded.

"No need to worry, sir. They're professionals."

The guy could hardly peel his own tangerine, so Maomao figured bathing himself was out of the question. She'd asked for clothing to be ready for him, just like when the Emperor bathed, and figured that while they were at it he should get a massage too.

"Don't you like massages, sir?"

"Does it stop at a massage?" he ventured.

"Often not."

This was a service industry, after all. And if the customer requested it, many practitioners would add extra services that—well, they didn't bear speaking of. Everyone knew that was how the pleasure quarter worked.

"Still going to have that bath, sir?"

"Thank you, I'll pass."

"Change of clothes?"

"I can do it myself." Jinshi took off his overgarment and pointedly pulled on the sleepwear on his own.

He's surprisingly well-built, Maomao observed, although she had no particular emotional reaction to that fact. She picked up the overgarment off the floor, folded it neatly, and put it away in a chest. It still carried a wisp of perfume, an aroma that conveyed its owner's excellent taste.

Maomao took a cup and a small teapot from the bedside and poured something for Jinshi. He tilted his mask up and took a drink. "Sleeping medicine or something?" Maybe it had tasted funny. Perhaps Maomao should have taken a sip to show that it was safe.

"It contains nutrients to boost your energy, sir."

Jinshi spat out the tea. Maomao, finding herself veritably drenched in it, couldn't help giving him a bit of a scowl.

“Why in the world would you give me that?”

“I’ve heard it’s the most effective remedy when a man is tired.”

“Do you, uh, mean what I think you mean by that?”

“What else could I mean, sir?”

The look on Jinshi’s face was a mixture of disgust and shyness. In fact, he seemed to be making that sort of face a lot today.

Maybe there’s some problem with me being so direct. Jinshi might be a man, but perhaps he was still embarrassed to hear biological facts stated so plainly. He was still young, after all, and maybe he wasn’t as mature as he often looked. She felt bad for acting like he was an animal who would be in rut all year round. Even so, his reaction seemed a little strange. Probably nothing worth worrying about.

Jinshi couldn’t seem to look Maomao in the eye, but she continued, “So, what kind of woman would you prefer?”

“Huh?” he said stupidly.

Maomao clapped twice, causing a group of five stunning ladies to file in from another room. Each of them looked sweet and innocent.

“Lady Suiren told me you prefer them your own age,” Maomao explained. Suiren was Jinshi’s caretaker. She could be mischievous in her way, but she was a first-rate attendant.

Given Jinshi’s apparent fixation on chastity, they’d endeavored to find virgins—a state all the more desirable because they were certain not to have any diseases. It had proved impossible to get enough from the Verdigris House itself, so they’d pulled some strings at some other nearby brothels. That had earned a frown from the madam, but if they wanted all these virgins on such short notice, that’s what it took.

The women had been told only that the man involved was a noble, which was enough to get them on board. They were all the more intrigued by what they glimpsed of Jinshi’s beauty under his mask.

Yes, Jinshi must have had the eye of many a young woman, yet at the moment he was simply standing with his jaw open. He looked at Maomao, his total befuddlement obvious even behind his mask. In the corner of the room, Gaoshun had gone beyond holding his head and advanced to pressing his forehead against the wall.

“Are none of them to your liking?” Maomao asked. It wasn’t Jinshi, but the assembled women, who reacted to this. Each started to gesture at Jinshi in

whatever way she thought would be most attractive. “None of them have yet known a man,” Maomao said. “The madam herself inspected them.”

Exactly what kind of inspection it was can be easily guessed.

Jinshi, moving as awkwardly as a puppet, looked at Maomao. “I just want to go to sleep. Please let me rest!”

“I see, sir. Then just pick a woman, any of them—”

“I mean literally!” he exclaimed.

Maomao’s shoulders slumped, and the courtesans left the room in a collective huff.

Instead Maomao went over to Gaoshun, whose shoulders were even slumped-er than hers, and said, “Would you like them, then, sir?”

“I, er, have a wife. A scary wife. And my daughter’s something of a stickler for cleanliness...” he said.

Ah, of course. Maybe it wasn’t the best idea to offer courtesans to a married man.

“Do you know what it’s like to be told ‘Papa, you’re filthy! You have to bathe last tonight!’?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

I know how his daughter must feel, anyway...

She did feel bad for Jinshi’s attendant having to stand around, though, so she offered him a nice sofa to sit on. There was another bed, and indeed another entire room available, but Gaoshun politely turned her down when she pointed this out. If anything, he worried that a divorce might be in the offing if he were ever to be discovered in a place like this.

Maomao went back to where Jinshi was reclining and pulled the covers over him. When she went to leave the room herself, she felt him holding on to her arm.

“Surely you could at least spare a lullaby.”

She didn’t say anything at first—she wanted to tell him no, but he was looking at her with those puppy-dog eyes he got sometimes. And anyway, after all the excitement with the bath and the courtesans and everything, it seemed this little break hadn’t helped him feel refreshed at all. He refused to let go of her, and she let out a sigh. “I’m not a good singer.”

“I don’t care.”

So, gently tapping the covers to keep time, Maomao began to sing. An old children’s song that the courtesans used to sing to her. It wasn’t long at all

before she heard Jinshi's breathing take on the even rhythm of sleep.

Jinshi left in the evening, just before the sun sank beneath the horizon. The nap must have been restorative, because he woke up looking much better and ate three entire bowls of congee. Maomao had started to fear he might work himself to death, but if he was still eating, he wouldn't die. If anything, she thought he might catch trouble from Suiren when he was too full for dinner that night. Or maybe she was worrying too much?

With his mask back in place, Jinshi boarded his carriage and Maomao watched it leave. As she stood there, she thought she felt a pair of eyes on her. Turning, she saw a courtesan looking wanton, leaning against the second-floor railing and smoking a pipe. It was Pairin, one of the Three Princesses. Her robe didn't do much to hide her abundant chest.

"Isn't it about time you gave in?" she asked.

"Gave in to what?" Maomao asked, turning away from her elder sister and heading back to the shop.

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Chapter 4: The Fire-Rat Cloak

Maomao's apothecary shop closed its doors as the lanterns were being lit at the Verdigris House. There was no point doing business after dark—it would only attract unsavory customers, and the lamp oil would be a waste of money, anyway. Maomao totaled up the day's earnings and handed them over to the madam. Keeping large sums of cash in her little shack would attract thieves and burglars. Having the money kept somewhere safe was far better, even if she did have to pay for the privilege. Then she gathered up the coals and the herbs and locked up the cramped little shop.

"All right, we're going home," she announced.

"What, already?" Chou-u groused, but she took him by the scruff of the neck and headed back to their shack. Though it was located just behind the Verdigris House, the walls were riddled with cracks that let in the wind, making it very cold.

Maomao placed the coals among the starter paper in the stove, and when there was a decent fire going, she tossed some kindling on it. Chou-u, feeling the cold, was curled up on his sleeping mat, wrapped in his blanket. Maomao heated some soup in a pot on the stove, stirring gently. It involved a base of dried meat, along with vegetables and kudzu she'd picked in the garden. She even shaved some ginger into it to take the edge off the chill.

"Not going to have any?" she asked.

"Sure am," Chou-u said, trying to shuffle over while still under his blanket like a giant pill bug. Maomao smacked him with a knuckle, but tossed a cotton jacket at him in exchange for taking away his blanket.

I wouldn't mind another winter outfit, Maomao thought. She was being pretty fairly compensated for "bringing up" Chou-u, but she didn't intend to waste the money. Chou-u might grumble, but so long as Maomao was the one getting the cash, the education he would receive was: those who don't work don't eat.

She poured some soup into a chipped bowl and handed it to Chou-u, who sat on a chair with his knees up and sipped at it. "Needs more meat," he said.

“If you want meat, go earn the money for it!” Maomao said. Then she took a sip of the soup herself. They didn’t have any congee, but she’d been able to get some bread. She took a bit from their supply and set it beside the soup pot to warm it up. Then she broke it in half and stuffed some simmered vegetables inside. She didn’t think the bread tasted particularly good—maybe on account of last year’s bad harvest. A poor crop led to poor-quality grain, perhaps.

“*You’ve* got money, right, Freckles? Why don’t we get some decent food, then?” Chou-u said, reaching for another piece of bread despite his complaining.

“I’m renting the shop from the old lady, moron. Do you have any idea what she charges?”

“Why not find another place, then?”

“Listen, you. It’s not as simple as that.” Maomao dipped her bread in what remained of her soup and put it in her mouth. She might have been able to lead a slightly richer life, had she so wished. But she had reasons for not doing so. “You’re coming with me tomorrow. We’re going clothes shopping. You’re cold like that, aren’t you?”

“Yay!” Chou-u said, tossing up his hands, but the motion threw him clear off his chair. His paralysis left him unable to catch himself, so he tumbled pathetically to the ground.

Maomao looked at him for a moment, her expression cool as she washed her bowl in the water bucket.

The next day, she and Chou-u went to the market, which lined the great thoroughfare that bisected the capital from north to south. The farther north you went, the richer the shops became, while the class and quality declined as you went south. The pleasure district was in the south of the capital, so the first market stalls they found didn’t even have awnings; they were just wares laid out on rush mats.

The farther you went into the side streets, the shadier the shops became. The proximity of the pleasure quarter seemed to breed places selling dubious medicaments. Naturally, an apothecary like Maomao wasn’t taken in by such products, and the merchants knew it; none of them called to her as she passed their stores. They were looking for men who weren’t yet used to the pleasure district; those made the best marks.

Maomao worked her way toward the center of the capital, grabbing Chou-u by the scruff of the neck each time he threatened to wander away. It was sometimes said that buying cheap could actually cost you money. A cotton jacket from one of the street stalls would certainly be inexpensive, but the material would be poor. It would never stand up to the brat running around in it and doing all the things children do. Any merchant with an actual building would know they needed the trust of the local shoppers; a jacket from somewhere with an actual storefront would cost a little more, but would inspire much more confidence in the product.

Maomao picked a place from the tangle of shops and went in—a place that sold clothing to commoners, including used clothing. When she brushed past the curtain and into the shop, she saw clothes hanging from the ceiling. Within, the shopkeeper was mending a garment and yawning. A brazier beside him was filled with crackling coals, but it was surrounded by a shield to prevent the sparks from landing on any of the wares.

"Aww, *used* clothes?"

"Don't be picky."

Chou-u was still small; he would hit a growth spurt soon. It would be more economical to buy something they wouldn't have to hesitate to replace. Maomao was looking through the merchandise for a child's padded jacket when something caught her eye.

"Whazzat?" Chou-u, ever eagle-eyed, came over.

It was a robe hanging on the wall—a long-skirted outfit of pure white. The lack of color made it look somewhat plain, but it also had a whiff of the exotic; it was most unusual. Maomao's eye was drawn to embroidery in what looked like a pattern of vines on the sleeves.

Could this be...

"Geez, that looks pretty cheap," said the little shit. Heaven forfend he ever hesitate to say whatever came into his head. Maomao gave him a smack, alert that the shopkeeper might be listening, but from the proprietor all she heard was laughter.

"Hah, you think that's cheap, boyo?"

"Isn't it? Girls' clothes are supposed to be colorful!"

"I s'pose you're right." The shopkeeper put a pin in a pincushion, then rubbed his stiff shoulders and smiled at them. He let his gaze drift to the robe. "But this robe, you see...a celestial nymph wore it once."

“A celestial nymph?” That seemed to get Chou-u’s interest. He had taken a seat on top of a chest of drawers; maybe the paralysis made it hard for him to stay standing for too long.

Annoyed, Maomao continued her search through the shop. The shopkeeper here was one of those clerks who killed time by chatting with the customers. No way of telling how much of what he said was true. All she remembered was how he used to get a hold of her father Luomen for hours at a time.

I just need to find something, and then we can get out of here.

If Chou-u was busy talking to the clerk, that was perfect. She could find something while he was distracted. But it was a small place. Like it or not, she was going to hear the clerk’s story while she browsed.

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Y’see, that robe came to me from the west. A villager in one of the little villages there helped a girl who was lost on the road. The girl was quite beautiful, and the villager fell head over heels in love with her.

She was a most unusual young lady: she had white skin and golden hair. She knew how to spin a thread that was unlike any other, and with it she wove several robes to repay the villager who’d helped her. The robes were embroidered with mysterious designs, and sold for several times what any other cloth was worth.

The girl insisted she wanted to go back to her hometown, but she didn’t seem to know where she lived. Must have come from some far land, I suppose. The villager proposed to the girl, and then again, and again, and finally she decided to accept him.

But it was poor timing, for just then, the girl’s family arrived in the village, looking for her. You could tell it was her family because they had the same sort of hair and skin. The villager had finally gotten the girl to agree to his proposal, though, and he wasn’t about to give her up. So he hid her away, and the entire village pretended they knew nothing about the matter.

The girl’s family went away, but they were suspicious. The villager decided he’d better hurry up and hold the wedding and make the young lady his bride. Once they were joined in marriage, her family would no longer be her family, you see.

The young lady objected, but the villagers paid her no heed. She was made to bathe at the village spring to purify herself, after which they planned to hold the wedding immediately. The girl wept as she washed herself. Her one comfort was that, for her bridal gown, she wore one of the robes she'd made. A reminder of her lost home.

Can you imagine what grief she must've felt? Even as she stood in her bridal gown, she almost drowned herself in tears.

As everyone around her celebrated, the girl came up to the altar to swear her vows to the villager. Yet even at that moment, she couldn't forget her family. She begged the man to return her to her relatives.

He refused. Whereupon the girl doused herself in some nearby oil, grabbed a torch, and lit herself on fire. She ran in flames past the panicked villagers, until she dove into the spring and vanished.

She left behind her only a single piece of cloth, the veil she had been wearing. Of the burning woman herself there was no sign; the villagers speculated that perhaps she'd returned to Heaven. Nor was anyone from her family ever seen again, so the villagers all agreed: the girl and her family had disappeared back up to the sky.

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"And *that* is the robe the nymph was wearing," the shopkeeper proclaimed.

"Wow!" Chou-u said, duly impressed. Just a few minutes before, he'd derided the garment as cheap, but now he looked at it as though at a shimmering jewel.

Maomao, meanwhile, was holding up a succession of jackets to Chou-u's back, wondering which of them might fit him best. She found one with a somewhat unpleasant color, but which was the perfect size.

"Hey, Freckles, this is some gown! How about we buy this?" Chou-u's eyes were sparkling.

"The boy's got a point," the shopkeeper ventured. "That celestial nymph wasn't much older than you, young lady. I'll even give you a special price on it, since the two of you are so alike."

Nice try, but the abacus he was holding suggested the price was still about one digit too many. Maomao nearly laughed out loud.

A celestial nymph, right! I can see a real one for free. After all, one slightly damaged nymph came to the Verdigris House on a regular basis.

"Are you telling me you don't believe the legend of the nymph?" the shopkeeper asked. "Some people have no sense of romance..." He spread his arms and shook his head with an expression of disappointment.

I'm the one who should be disappointed, Maomao thought. Not only had she seen a celestial nymph before—she'd seen one vanish into the water just like in the story. The "moon spirit" had come back out of the water, too, looking like a drenched mouse and asking if she ever planned a repeat performance. But then again, such sights must be rare indeed. Without meaning to, Maomao chuckled at the memory.

The world was full of strange things—but they always had some explanation. It was only because people didn't know why certain things happened that they made up stories about curses and magical powers and even sometimes ghosts.

Maomao took a good, hard look at the robe the "celestial nymph" had woven. "May I touch it?"

"Sure. Just don't get it dirty."

Maomao felt the texture of the fabric and studied the embroidery. Then she grinned. "Shopkeep, you really think you can sell this thing at that price?"

"Wh-What makes you say that? Of course I can." And yet he'd been trying to foist it off on Maomao. If he'd really believed the robe had been woven by a genuine visitor from Heaven, he'd have added still another digit to the price.

"Uh-huh. And what if you could sell it for ten times what you're asking?"

"Ten times? Hah, well, I'd certainly be a happy shopkeeper. I'd give you everything you're holding for free."

The clerk sounded like he was joking, but Maomao said, "Would you, now? You heard the man, Chou-u."

"Uh, yeah, I did, but you can't get ten times the price for that thing, can you? You're out of your mind, Freckles."

Even Chou-u was making fun of her now. Maomao scowled and grabbed a coal from the brazier with a pair of metal chopsticks. "I'm going to borrow the robe and this coal for a few minutes, mister."

"Hey! What are you doing?"

Maomao took out her purse and put it down on the chest of drawers: *thunk*. It was all the money she had with her, but it ought to cover this one robe. The shopkeeper stopped complaining when he saw the cash. Maomao, meanwhile, took the robe and the coal out into the street—and then she threw the garment on the ground.

"H-Hey!" The shopkeeper started shouting again, looking a little crazed, but Maomao ignored him. Instead, she took the coal in her chopsticks and dropped it on the dress.

"Hey, Freckles, I'm kinda hot!" Chou-u said from under several layers of cotton jackets. She'd overdressed him, layering jackets until he looked like a pudgy *daruma* doll.

"Take a few layers off, then."

Chou-u was only wearing them because *he'd* complained about having to carry them. Maomao herself was holding a new robe of her own. She usually preferred less eye-watering colors, but she wasn't about to complain about something she'd gotten for free. It fit her, and that was what counted.

"Hey, Freckles. Why didn't the robe burn, anyway?" Chou-u asked.

Maomao had snorted in spite of herself at what the shopkeeper had called the celestial nymph's robe. There was a much better name for it than that. The fire-rat cloak, she'd suggested, whispering it into the shopkeeper's ear.

The robe had refused to catch fire when she'd dropped the coal on it. In fact, it had emerged without so much as a scorch mark. Passersby were amazed—so amazed that they might indeed have believed her if she'd told them the robe had belonged to a celestial nymph.

"What are clothes made from, Chou-u?"

"What are they made from? You mean, like, cotton and hemp and stuff? It's just grass and fibers. And maybe sometimes bugs or something."

"That robe was made of rock."

Chou-u's jaw dropped so fast Maomao almost laughed. "Rock! You mean, like, *rock* rock? How'd they do that?"

"Even stone can take many different forms." Rock fiber could be turned into cloth. It was an unusual technique, but one that had existed since ancient times, called *huohuanbu*. But that didn't sound very impressive, so she'd borrowed a name used for the material in the eastern island country. "And of course, rock doesn't burn."

Still, what must it have looked like to the people witnessing it? Even those who knew about huohuanbu might be seeing it for the first time. The uniqueness of it would help drive the price up among curious collectors. And it had won Maomao a veritable wardrobe of free clothes.

"Huh, so that's the story. What about the celestial nymph, then?"

"I suspect it was..."

Half true, and half not.

Maomao had recognized the embroidery on the sleeves of the robe—it was written in the characters of the foreign country that her old man, Luomen, had often used to write his notes. When stylized, the characters could look like swirling, climbing vines. The so-called celestial nymph had probably been from that area, and if she'd had golden hair and white skin, maybe she had some northern blood in her veins as well.

If the marriage of close relatives went on too long in a small village, the offspring would grow weaker, so the inhabitants of such places would certainly wish for more distant bloodlines. Maybe the young woman really had been lost, or maybe she'd been kidnapped. Whichever it was, the villagers certainly wouldn't want to let such a prize go.

So the girl had made her dress, sick with the wish to go home to her family. She wove with an unusual material, rock fiber, and embroidered it with characters the villagers couldn't read, a secret message asking for help from her homeland. On the day of the wedding, she'd most likely been wearing undergarments she'd soaked with water. She would have drenched her hair, too, using her veil to conceal the fact.

"Did you know there's a way to prevent a wooden bowl from burning even if you put fire to it?" Maomao said.

You simply filled the bowl with water. Until it dried completely, the wood wouldn't catch fire. At least so long as the heat didn't get above a certain temperature. If the woman wore wetted undergarments under a robe of rock fiber, and if she then put a more flammable garment over that as well, then all she needed to do was jump in the spring before she sustained any burns. If she used the patterns on the robe to indicate how she'd escaped, it was likely someone would find her later.

Of course, she would have had no guarantee that it would work. But judging by the shopkeeper's tale, she'd succeeded. On some level, it wasn't so different from the performance they'd put on at the banquet for the envoys

the year before.

"Huh!" Chou-u said, looking genuinely impressed. "Why didn't you say any of that to the guy at the store?"

"I wouldn't want to spoil the *romance*."

Chou-u laughed, as if to admit that she was right.

There was, one might add, another reason, albeit one Chou-u didn't need to know about. There had been fine embroidery on the inside of the robe as well as the sleeves.

So we have a young lady from somewhere either in the west or the north, Maomao thought. Would a perfectly ordinary young woman have the nerve to set fire to herself and run around? Maomao certainly wouldn't. What's more, the young lady could read, and knew how to make the stone fiber. Did everyone on the streets in these other lands know how to do those things? It seemed unlikely that some wandering performer would possess such accomplishments.

Maybe she was a spy or something.

The west was more prone to small border disputes with other countries than were many nearby regions. The idea that the young woman was an intelligence agent wasn't out of the question, although if so, she seemed to be a somewhat careless one.

Maomao, for her part, smiled sardonically at these pointless fantasies and continued on the way home.

Chapter 5: Let Them Eat Cake

"Apothecary! Apothecary! Come quickly!" A haggard man was pounding furiously on the door of the shack. Maomao, not looking pleased, rolled out of bed and opened the little window at the entrance in a way that made it clear she found this a nuisance.

A filthy, middle-aged man stood outside—not someone who looked like he had any money. She was about to close the window and pretend she hadn't seen anything.

"I know you can hear me!"

Dammit.

She didn't want to deal with this. Why would he come to her shop, anyway? He'd probably come to her old man once, tugged at his heartstrings until some charity had been forthcoming. This was why her father never had any money.

"What happened to the old guy who used to be here?"

"He's gone. Went to find his fortune."

"What? Don't bullshit me!"

The man pounded angrily on the door of the tumbledown house, but Maomao only gave him a cold stare. She even found herself grunting "Pfah," somewhat in spite of herself.

"You're supposed to be running an apothecary shop! Don't you even have any medicine?"

"Yeah, I'm running an apothecary shop, all right. As a *business*. That means money talks." Maomao would hardly be averse to seeing the man, if he had cash—but he didn't seem to be here in that kind of good faith.

"You'd take money from the poor and needy?!"

"If you can't pay, then stay away. It's because the likes of you come rooting around that I have to live in this shack." Maomao gave the door a good rap herself to scare the man away. Chou-u hid behind her, holding a soup pot and a ladle. If anything happened, he would smack them together to make as much noise as possible. He might be impudent, but he had a decent

head on his shoulders. It would be loud enough to bring someone from the Verdigris House.

The visitor, though, had gone silent. Maomao hated this sort. If people thought you'd hand out donations to them, they wouldn't hesitate to take advantage of you.

The man's grimy face broke into a scowl when he saw Maomao wasn't going to give in. He leaned weakly against the door. "If it's money you want, I'll pay you. Not right away, but I swear I will. So please, come look... My child..."

The old collapse-in-a-crying-heap routine. Nice. Still, the man sat there with his head down, showing no sign of moving. *Now we can't get out the door*, Maomao thought.

"Hey, Freckles..." Chou-u, still holding the cooking utensils, was glancing at her.

This is ridiculous, Maomao thought, but despite her frustration, she grabbed a brush off the table and plunged it into some ink. She opened a beat-up old cupboard, revealing a sheaf of paper and some wood strips. She took out one of the strips and jotted something on it, then flung it at the man.

"Can you at least write your name?"

After a beat, the man said, "No... I can't."

"Thought not." Next she tossed a knife to him. "Use that to make your mark. Just your thumb's plenty."

The man squinted at the wood strip, but he couldn't possibly read what was on it. "What does it say?" he asked.

"That you'll pay for the treatment. It's an IOU."

Reluctantly, the man pressed the knife into the pad of his thumb, then made a mark in blood on the strip.

"Seems like a lotta trouble," Chou-u muttered from behind her, but she nudged him with her toe to shut him up.

"This all right?" the man asked, looking at his thumb and handing the wood strip back to Maomao.

"Guess it'll have to be." Maomao smiled—a bit villainously, but smiled all the same—and undid the door bar.

The man eventually led her to an alleyway not far from the pleasure district. Men with haggard bodies and dirty clothes watched them; the man

who had brought her gave the others a threatening look.

Maybe we should have brought another bodyguard or two. Maomao wasn't stupid enough to just run off after the guy; she'd asked Ukyou to come along. He might be a bit excitable, but as the head of the menservants he knew his way around rough company.

"What'd we come all the way out here for?" Ukyou asked.

"I don't like it any more than you do, but what else was I supposed to do?"

"Huh! So you take after your old man, after all," he said, mussing her hair fondly. She pushed his hand away.

"This is it," the man said, leading them into a shack that had a piece of cloth instead of a door. A rancid smell filled the air, along with the odors of sweat and grime, not to mention old trash and even human waste. A child, not so different in age from Chou-u, lay on top of something dirty—it might have been a reed mat, or maybe rushes; Maomao couldn't tell. Beside her, a rather older child looked at the man with empty eyes. She was a girl, several years younger than Maomao, but she had none of the vitality her youth deserved.

"Daddy." She must have cried all her tears long ago, for her cheeks were dry as she looked at the man.

"Here she is. I'm begging you, examine her!"

Wordlessly, Maomao looked at the girl lying on the mat. The color of her arms and legs was dull. Her body spasmed occasionally, and the smell of waste was probably due to whatever was coming out of her. Her hair was such a mess that it was hard to tell whether she was a boy or a girl, and she was terribly filthy.

"How long has she been like this?"

"Since a few days ago. But even before that, her hands seemed to be bothering her," the older girl answered.

Maomao wrapped a cloth around each of her own hands, as well as around her mouth, and then she approached the child.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" the father demanded angrily.

"What do you mean, what? She's sick, isn't she? I won't do anyone any good if I catch whatever she has. But if it bothers you that much, I don't have to look at her." Maomao glared at the man, and he lowered the hand he had raised—prompting Ukyou, who had come up behind him, to cross his arms as well. He'd probably been preparing to put the man's arm out of joint if he'd

turned violent.

Overprotective, Maomao thought. She touched the child's hand. Circulation was poor; the blood wasn't reaching the fingertips, which were turning necrotic as if with frostbite. The place was drafty, to be sure, but not cold enough for that. Besides, the child almost looked paralyzed. Her eyes were open and she made strange sounds occasionally, as if in a waking dream.

"She's worse than this morning. What do we do, Daddy? She'll end up like Mommy..."

The father looked at his daughter, who looked about to cry, and seemed at a loss. He scratched his head and crouched down. "Please. You've gotta help her. I don't want to lose another family member!" The older girl also fell to her knees, and both of them pressed their foreheads into the dirt floor.

Well, this is a tough one.

"Her mother died the same way?" Maomao asked.

"No. She succumbed to a miscarriage..."

"A miscarriage?" Maomao looked at the spittle dribbling down the immobile child's cheek. There was a layer of thick stuff around her mouth. "Have you been able to get her to eat anything?"

"We gave her some congee, just a little..."

At that, Maomao looked over at the filthy stove, where she saw an ash-covered clay pot containing gruel the consistency of glue. It was hard to see much that looked like rice in it; it seemed to contain whatever they'd been able to scare up.

"What exactly is in that?" she asked. Aside from the scarce rice, she saw what she took to be potatoes and various herbs. Did it also contain other grains?

The older girl stumbled out of the house and returned with a handful of herbs. Nothing poisonous, but nothing nutritious either. The sort of grasses one ate to stave off starvation during times of famine.

"I know this isn't it. What else?" Maomao asked, but the girl averted her eyes. "Nothing?" she pressed, and finally the girl gave in and opened a cupboard, from which she produced some small cakes. Several of them, each carefully wrapped. Not of a quality that would have passed muster among the consorts of the rear palace, but still, they had a distinctly sweet smell. If they seemed a little damp, it was probably because they were being conserved,

eaten bit by precious bit.

"What are those?" the father asked, his eyes widening in surprise. Apparently this was the first time he was learning of them.

"Someone gave them to us. We decided to have them a little bit at a time when there was nothing to eat. We showed them to Mommy, but she said not to tell you about them, Daddy."

Shocked by the deception, the man's face twisted into a grimace. "How dare you hide those from me! I run this house!"

The older girl's lifeless eyes suddenly took on a spark. "But you don't ever work, Daddy. You only gamble. You make us beg by the roadside and then you take what we earn!"

Her words were harsh, but judging by the way the man's head drooped, evidently true. Here Maomao had been thinking he only wanted the best for his daughter—but maybe he'd just been afraid to lose a source of income.

"Did you give your sister any of this?" Maomao asked, and the girl nodded. Maomao tore off a bit of the cake, sniffed it, and licked a few crumbs from her fingers. Her eyes narrowed. "You said someone gave this to you." It was sweet—sweet enough to tell it contained sugar. An awfully rich donation to give a waif on the street. "Who gave it to you?" Maomao asked. "When?"

"Don't know. My little sister was the one who got it, and she can't talk. It was before Mommy died, so I guess maybe a month ago."

A cake with proper sugar was a real luxury for a commoner. Surely anyone who found themselves in possession of such a thing would simply eat it before it was taken from them.

"You know anyone else who got anything like this?" Maomao asked, but the girl shook her head. "All right. Was anyone showing symptoms like this girl's about a month ago?"

"Now that you mention it..." Ukyou said. He always was a sharp one. When Maomao saw him leave, she turned back to the child. She removed the cloth from around her hands and mouth and picked the girl up.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm taking her back with me. She'll never get better in a cesspit like this. And take my advice—get rid of those treats."

More than anything, it didn't look like the girl had any hope of getting a decent meal in this place. And there was something else that bugged Maomao

too.

"Let me take her," Ukyou said, coming back.

"Thank you." Maomao handed the child to him, and together they left the shack behind.

"The old man next door—his fingers were rotted off," Ukyou said as he trotted along carrying the girl. He said he'd spoken to the old man as the elder was begging by the roadside. His recollections had been hazy at first, but a few small coins in his palm had soon jogged his memory. "He said a woman was giving them out. Claims he didn't see her face."

"Hmm," Maomao said. This story was starting to sound fishy.

Ukyou saw Maomao back to her home, then headed straight for the Verdigris House. She tried to give him a few coins, but he said, "I'm used to protecting kids," and refused. It was how he'd always been.

Maomao brought the grimy child into her shack. Chou-u, who'd been left effectively to watch the house, gave a pointed sniff. "What's with her? She's filthy."

"A good reason for you to go heat some water. And here, take this and go ask Grams for some white rice." She gave him a handful of coins, and he dutifully went over to the Verdigris House. The thought of white rice to eat must have motivated him.

It seemed likely the girl's condition had taken a sudden turn for the worse because of the cakes she'd been fed. The older girl had said she hadn't eaten any herself, but had saved them all for her sister. If Mom was pregnant, maybe she'd found herself snacking on some too.

Maomao looked on the shelf. Given that she ran an apothecary shop in the pleasure district, she kept a supply of various abortifacients on hand, many of which would be deadly in the wrong dosage. One of them produced symptoms much like this. It was a toxin found in bad grain, and even small amounts could cause poisoning. The toxin restricted blood flow to the limbs and could quickly induce necrosis. The body became paralyzed, and people sometimes had hallucinations.

The treatment was simple: stop ingesting the poison. That, and some exercise would work it out of the body. Sadly for this girl, if she'd been left in her house, she would have likely wasted away before she got better. Hence, Maomao had transferred her.

I wonder if I really needed to do that, she thought. It wasn't as if she

believed the father would ever actually pay her. And if he did, she had to suspect the money would come from the older sister's begging. Even as she reflected that she'd really stepped in it this time, she was already getting some clean rags together.

A few days later, they had a visitor, but it wasn't the middle-aged man again. Rather, his daughter. She had fresh bruises—and Maomao doubted she'd gotten them from falling down.

The girl's little sister had recovered to the point where she could walk, albeit not very steadily. Malnutrition was a far bigger concern for her than the toxin had been. Her fingers still didn't move very well, but that would probably heal in time. Maomao was relieved to have at last gotten her into the bath the day before. At the moment, the girl was out for a walk with Chou-u, who'd started to act like a big brother to her.

"Did you bring my money?" Maomao asked the grubby young girl, her gaze hard.

"Where's my little sister?"

"See for yourself." Chou-u could be seen outside the crude window, helping the child as she stumbled along. With her hair washed and tied up, she was actually starting to look like a little girl again.

When she spotted her sister, the older girl almost went running over to her, but Maomao caught her hand. "My money."

"Money... Your money..."

She didn't have it. Of course she didn't. Maomao had known from the moment the old man had failed to come himself. That was why she'd had him sign what she had. She flashed the wooden slip at the girl.

"You don't have it? That's fine. You can just sell *her*." She jerked her thumb toward the toddling child. "It's probably not too late, if we start training her now."

The older girl went silent for a beat, then her eyes slowly met Maomao's.

Hm? Maomao had been sure she would break down crying. But those dim, near-dead eyes had that spark in them again.

"*I* would bring more than a mute little girl," the older sister said, smacking herself demonstratively on the chest. (A chest, Maomao noted, even less impressive than her own abysmal example.)

Maomao looked at the girl. "You're saying you'll take your sister's place?

Do you know what you're volunteering for?" She leaned against the wall and scratched her shin with her toes.

"I know full well! But it's either that, or keep begging for the rest of my life! I'm sure he'll have me turning tricks before long, anyway! Daddy takes away whatever little money I earn every day, so what's the difference?" She stamped her feet on the floor: better to just go ahead and be a prostitute.

Sometimes, young women came knocking on Maomao's door, young women under the mistaken impression that the courtesans of the Verdigris House enjoyed a far better life than those on the lowest level of society. Knowing that Maomao was somehow connected to the place, they wanted her to put in a good word for them. This girl seemed to have come here with something similar in mind.

Maomao gave her an appraising look, then sighed pointedly. "And you think you're worth that much? In your state, a farm girl fresh from the fields would fetch more than you."

"But my little sister's in the same condition! And she can't even talk!"

"But she's younger than you are. That means quicker to learn discipline. Besides, you'd be surprised how many men out there prefer the silent types." She was being deliberately cruel, but the young woman's eyes remained fixed on her. The girl never averted her gaze; the light in her eyes only burned stronger.

"I *have* to get out of there. It's that, or spend the rest of my life as the mud under his feet. And I'll take anything, *anything*, before that!"

Maomao put her pinky in her ear and started scratching industriously. It was a perfectly common story. When you were trapped in the mud, the harder you struggled to get free, the deeper you got sucked in. But maybe fighting was still better than not doing anything at all, just waiting to sink to your doom. Maomao liked the ones who tried to take matters into their own hands, even if it was futile, instead of waiting and hoping someone would miraculously show up to pull them out.

Even so, she had no special reason to help this girl—but also no special reason to stop her.

"The lady who runs that brothel is the most miserly old hag in the entire capital," Maomao said. "If she doesn't think you'll make her money, she won't give you the time of day—and even if she does purchase you, she'll lowball you as hard as she can."

The young woman still didn't flinch.

"If you come to her with nothing to offer but your own haggard body, she'll probably slap a collar on you so you don't run away. And if you manage to escape anyway—or at least try to—well, get ready to pay for it with a rib or two."

"Is that all? That would be nothing next to...next to having my own father break my arm! I'm through living like a rat in a hole!"

"So what do we do with your little sister?"

"I'm sure the old lady will take her in once she sees that I'll work hard enough to cover both of us!"

The Verdigris House was a practical place. If the girl could generate that sort of money, the madam would probably indulge her.

"If she can't make any use of you, neither of you will be any better than rats." Still looking less than pleased, Maomao went over to a chest of clothes and rifled through it, pulling out an outfit almost at random. One of the things she'd gotten at the used-clothes shop. It bordered on the ostentatious, but she tossed it at the filthy young girl. "Use the well to wash up. Everything, including your hair. It'll be cold. Too bad. If you have one solitary flea on you when you show up, she'll chase you away with a broom before you get in the door."

The girl clutched the clothing and made for the well. What would happen to her after this was none of Maomao's concern. She'd chosen this path for herself. If she was going to regret it, then she could stay in the mud until she sank out of sight.

Chapter 6: The Last Volume

Gaoshun's son Basen came knocking on the door of the apothecary shop with several volumes of the encyclopedia. Maomao offered the young man (who looked every bit as put out as usual) the battered cushion and poured some tea for him.

"Master Jinshi is busy," Basen said. Evidently meaning he didn't have the spare time to be coming here.

The reason he was still using Jinshi's "eunuch name" was partly as an alias, but chiefly because Basen simply couldn't speak his true name. The names of nobles were not to be pronounced lightly in the hearing of commoners.

The courtesans of the Verdigris House were all aflutter to see Maomao entertaining someone other than the usual beauty and his attendant. The madam, in particular, was trying to act nonchalant, but Maomao could see the abacus working in her head.

Unlike when she was with Jinshi, the door to the shop remained open while Basen was present, their dealings completely visible to the world. Perhaps it was an act of consideration on Basen's part, a way of showing that nothing inappropriate was happening between them.

"I've brought what you asked for," Basen said, and undid a package wrapped in cloth to reveal several thick books, one of which Maomao recognized quite well. An encyclopedia of bugs, part of a set that included books about birds, fish, and plants as well. Maomao's interests were primarily herbal in nature; she'd devoured the volume on plant life, but this one on bugs she'd merely skimmed.

I hope it's in here, she thought. Sazen had said her predecessor had been working on research regarding locusts. It must be here. But she didn't see it. No matter how many times she looked, she couldn't find anything on them. Eventually, even Basen started flipping the pages, searching for the elusive entry.

"It's not in here?" he finally asked.

“It would seem not.”

“You said it would be.”

So what if she had? What wasn’t there, wasn’t there. It was confusing at best, though. Had Sazen pulled a fast one on them? Not likely; what would he get out of it?

“Did anyone handle this book while it was in storage?” Maomao asked, even though she knew that this was to cast suspicion on the soldier who’d obtained it.

“Who would be interested in something like this?”

“People like what they like.”

Nonetheless, the possibility seemed remote. If someone was going to loot the place, there were more obviously valuable things to steal.

Maomao groaned dispiritedly, but then she spotted someone coming toward the shop. Someone moving with all the grace of a willow tree in a gentle breeze, yet profoundly well-endowed—it was her older sister Pairin.

Maomao watched her with a scowl forming on her face. The madam was trailing behind Pairin, making no effort to stop her. She’d already sized up Basen, it seemed.

Pairin was a very pleasant courtesan. She was the oldest one working at the Verdigris House, but her beauty was undiminished, and she still caught the eye of many a man. The big dog—Lihaku—was a prime example. She was also reputed to be the greatest dancer in the capital. Not to mention a fine older sister; she was always kind to the younger courtesans and the apprentices.

However, she wasn’t without her faults.

Pairin sidled up and stood behind Basen—then ran one beautiful, shapely finger along his cheek.

Basen just about jumped out of his skin, although he somehow managed to remain seated while he did it. No, it might not make much sense, but evidently he was agile enough to “jump” without ever getting up.

“Sis...”

“Oh, pardon me. He had some dust on his shoulder.”

There was no way that was true. If the dust was on his shoulder, why brush his cheek?

Pairin’s every movement was studied and elegant; each gesture exuded womanliness. Her eyes were smiling gently, but to Maomao she looked like a

hungry carnivore. Pairin had been "taking tea" the past several days; in other words, she hadn't been seeing clients. This was no indication that she couldn't attract paying customers—rather, it was a sign that working every day was beneath her. But there was a wrinkle: Pairin didn't like taking tea. Her appetite was going unsatisfied.

"Wh-What's going on?!" Basen tried to back away, but it was a small shop; Pairin soon had him cornered.

"Gracious, it's still there. Here, hold still and I'll get it for you."

Maomao slid her mortar and pestle out of the way and put them up on a shelf before Basen could stumble over them. The tray of teacups and snacks, she held in her hand.

She'll give him the first time free.

Basen's face was somehow simultaneously both pale and flushed. If Lihaku were to show up at this exact moment, things would really get interesting. Maomao put on her shoes and munched on one of the snacks she was safeguarding. They weren't as nice as the ones that were brought out when Jinshi visited—that was just like the old lady. Still, they were perfectly luxurious, thin rice crackers with a mild taste of shrimp. Just the sort of thing Maomao liked.

Oh, man! I got it! He's a virgin, she thought. There was just something about him that said it. It made sense now, she thought, leaning against one wall and taking another bite of rice cracker, then washing it down with tea. She saw an apprentice watching her enviously, but she could hardly give the girl a snack right in front of the madam. Instead, she resolved not to eat the last cracker, but save it to give the girl later.

"Arrgh! I gave you what I was sent here to give you. I'm leaving!" Basen said, trying to pull his belt tight again (Pairin had almost gotten it off him) as he fled the shop. Maomao wondered if she should tell him that his underwear was showing.

"Aww," Pairin said, sitting down. "A virgin, and I almost had him!"

So she thought so too. Pairin would have been an exemplary elder sister, if not for behavior like this. And Maomao felt she was getting worse every year.

"And to think—one taste, and it's paradise..." the madam said regretfully.

Uh, pretty sure you mean hell, Maomao thought.

She'd better tell Lihaku to hurry up and save his money to buy Pairin out.

Before Chou-u got old enough to catch the princess's eye.

Sazen was sweeping by the front gate. Until he got strong enough to serve as a proper manservant, he was stuck doing what amounted to apprentice's work. That was how Ukyou, the foreman of the menservants, ran things. If the candidate seemed too content with menial labor, Ukyou would decide he didn't have the right stuff to make a worthwhile member of the staff, and in due course he would be released. Men who displayed indignation at having to do the work of young girls and tried to learn other jobs would be taken on board.

The sight of Sazen humming a tune as he swept the ground left little doubt in Maomao's mind that he was not long for their establishment.

"Hey," Maomao said brusquely.

"Hm?" Having changed out of his dirty clothing and shaved his beard, Sazen looked several years younger.

"The book's here." She showed him the volumes Basen had brought her, which she had wrapped in a carrying cloth. There was an audible *thunk* as she set it down. "And it's not what you said it would be."

Including the books Sazen had had with him, the entire encyclopedia came to fourteen volumes. None of them, however, seemed to contain anything about locusts. Maomao remembered the fourteen books from when she had been in that little room, so she knew the numbers matched.

"What? But that doesn't make any sense." Sazen undid the cloth and looked at the books. He squinted, inspecting them closely, and then his face darkened. "This isn't all of them," he announced.

"It's all the books that were in that room," Maomao said, confident that even she could count to fourteen.

"No, I mean these specifically," Sazen said, picking up the bug-related tomes. There were two of them, clearly labeled *I* and *II*. "There were supposed to be three volumes about insects."

"*What?*"

That meant there was at least one book that had never been in that room—or at least, that someone had removed it before Maomao got there.

"Huh! I wonder who would ever take something like that," Sazen said.

"It looks like *you* would."

"No, no. During the old guy's time, the book was there, I know it was."

The “old guy” was presumably the physician who had been banished from the rear palace. He’d been researching an elixir of immortality, or so Maomao had heard.

“I wonder if they buried him with it or something,” Sazen said.

“Why in the world would they do that?”

“It’s a tradition in my hometown.”

Well, she wasn’t asking about Sazen’s hometown, was she? But she *was* curious about the “old guy.”

“Why did he die, anyway?” Had it been simple old age? If he’d lived, he would have been about the same age as Maomao’s old man, so it wouldn’t be that surprising. The deceased physician was also said to have studied in the west at one point, so perhaps they’d known each other.

“Ah... Well. It was an experiment gone wrong.”

“Gone wrong?”

“They were trying to create an elixir of immortality, right? And to do that, you’ve got to test it out, don’t you?”

Does that mean...

There was something Maomao had been wondering about, something about the resurrection drug that had been used on Chou-u and the other children. Chou-u had gotten off with just some mild paralysis—but a drug that effectively killed you and then brought you back to life would never simply work that well on the first try. They must have conducted a series of experiments, gradually increasing the prospect of success.

So how had they done the experiments? They’d used rats, yes, but to really know it was going to work, you would eventually have to test it on actual human beings.

“Hey... What’s wrong with you?” Sazen grimaced. For a moment Maomao wondered why, but she soon realized: she was grinning horribly from ear to ear.

“Tell me. Where did they bury him?”

“No idea. I wasn’t the one in charge of that sort of thing.”

“Who was?”

Sazen scratched his head. “I guess you’d know her by the name Suirei. She was the old guy’s helper. You know, the expressionless one. The young mistress’s, uh, older half-sister, I guess they called her.”

A shock ran through Maomao, and before she knew what she was doing,

she had smacked Sazen on the shoulder as hard as she could. Why hadn't she realized it sooner? Suirei: a surviving member of the Shi clan, the previous emperor's granddaughter, and Shisui's half-sister.

"Ouch! What'd you do that for?"

"I've got it! You just keep sweeping. Don't slack!"

Maomao rewrapped the book in its cloth, then rushed back to her shop to write a letter.

She requested a manservant to deliver her missive as soon as possible. Writing directly to Jinshi would have been to overstep herself, so she typically addressed her letters to either Gaoshun or Basen—but given that Basen didn't always seem to have it together very well, she mostly wrote to Gaoshun.

The next morning came quickly, and with it an answer to her letter, followed closely by a carriage to pick her up. It would take her to where Suirei was—Maomao had heard she was now living with Ah-Duo, a former high consort. Maomao gave the encyclopedia volumes to a servant who came along with the carriage, then closed the shop door.

"Aw, you get to go out? Lucky you!" Chou-u said, tugging on Maomao's sleeve. She frowned at him. "Take me too!"

"Absolutely not."

Not only Suirei, but the other Shi clan children lived with Ah-Duo. Keeping Chou-u away from all of them was the whole point of having him here; she wasn't about to take him straight to them.

"Jerk! You get to have all the fun!"

"I'm going for work. Maybe you can pass the time by cleaning in front of the shop or something." She patted him on the head and passed him off to Ukyou. Ukyou, who liked kids, went away with Chou-u riding on his shoulders.

The new girl, the poor man's daughter, was hanging around too. Her older sister was currently in an evaluation period as an apprentice. The madam had made clear that if she turned out to be a poor learner, she would soon be turned out, period. The girls' father had come to take them back several times, but each time the menservants had chased him away. He'd tried to browbeat Maomao as well, but it was his daughter who had said she wanted to be a courtesan. Maomao hadn't been involved then and wasn't involved

now—and above all, she still hadn't gotten any money.

Come on, hurry up and pay me... She hoped his payment would appropriately reflect the complete success of her efforts. Maomao looked over at Chou-u riding on Ukyou's shoulders. *And what are we going to do about him?* If he hadn't been partially paralyzed, they could have trained him as one of the menservants—but to be a bouncer at a brothel required a certain level of physical capacity.

Maybe I should make him an apothecary, Maomao thought. At the moment, though, Chou-u showed no interest in matters medicinal. Maomao, by contrast, had already known a hundred different formulae by his age. *How can he not be interested—when it's so fascinating!* Maomao got into the carriage, pouting a little.

Ah-Duo's residence was grand and sumptuous, as befitted an Imperial villa. Maomao was made to change clothes before she disembarked the carriage. She knew Ah-Duo didn't particularly care about such niceties, but propriety demanded it.

Thus Maomao found herself walking along, holding up the hem of her long skirt so it wouldn't get dirty. She passed under a magnificent gate and through a courtyard laid with gravel. It was like a painting: garden stones and gravel and moss. The beauty of the place amply communicated the groundskeeper's pride in their work.

After a short walk, Maomao arrived at a room where she found both Ah-Duo—the mistress of the house—and another person, both of them dressed like men.

"Welcome." Ah-Duo's voice was as clear and strong as ever; indeed, perhaps even more than before.

The person with her was Suirei. Perhaps she was dressed in male attire because she'd become used to it, or perhaps she had some other reason. She was as expressionless as she'd always been, and stood a step behind Ah-Duo.

"I suppose there's no need for formalities. I'll be present, but don't mind me. Please, speak freely." So saying, Ah-Duo seated herself on a couch, then gestured to Maomao, who, as a guest, sat next, and finally Suirei took a seat.

"Don't mind me." Easy for her to say. How could Maomao not mind her? Despite having some difficulty with the request, Maomao took the encyclopedia volumes, brought in by the servant, and set them on the table.

Well, if this was something they didn't want Ah-Duo to know, then Jinshi presumably would have handled things differently. Maomao had no choice but to forge ahead.

"Do you recognize these?"

"My mentor was using them." Suirei's tone was more polite than usual, perhaps because Ah-Duo was there.

"Is this all of them?"

Suirei cocked her head and looked at the books. After a moment she said, "One's missing. I believe there should be fifteen volumes."

"And do you know where the missing volume might be?"

"I'm afraid I don't," she said softly, and it didn't look like she was lying. What reason did she have to lie, anyway? Any connection between her and the Shi clan was already moot, but neither could she show herself in public. Her only path in life was to be sequestered in a place like this. Maomao didn't know what might happen to her, what the Emperor had planned for her, but she felt it was a waste. Suirei was a talented pharmacist.

If she didn't know where the book was, then they would have to move on to the next question. "This mentor of yours, then. Do you know where *he* is?"

The little flinch this provoked from Suirei didn't escape Maomao's notice. Ah-Duo sipped her tea and watched them.

"I knew it. He's alive," Maomao said, more a statement than a question. "He must have tested the resurrection drug on himself."

Suirei lowered her eyes, then slowly closed them. Finally she nodded in resignation. "That's right. It was the only way out of that fortress."

So Suirei's mentor had taken the resurrection drug himself, on the pretense of doing an experiment. And from the way she was talking, he had survived the experience.

But Suirei added, "You won't be able to find out what you want to know from him. It doesn't even matter if you talk to him or not."

"What do you mean?" Maomao asked.

Suirei's eyes widened slightly. "The boy—Chou-u, that's what you call him now, isn't it? You know what happened to him. Can't you connect the dots?"

Chou-u had indeed taken the drug, died, and come back to life. But it had impaired the movement on one side of his body, and he had lost his memories as well.

“Are you suggesting your mentor is amnesiac?”

“Not exactly, but you’ve got the right idea. In fact, you may have crossed paths with him already without ever knowing it.”

“What are you getting at?”

Suirei’s eyes drifted down sadly. “You remember the hot-springs town?”

“Yes.” A hidden village that worshipped a fox deity. The light of the lanterns there still burned brightly in her memory.

“One of the bedridden old men there was my mentor.” The hot-springs town was a place for rejuvenation and recovery, and there had been more than one person fitting that description. “He no longer remembers who or what he once was. If he had been well, I don’t believe *she* would ever have imagined dragging you into all that.”

Her face darkened again as she spoke the word “*she*.” Maomao didn’t know what kind of relationship the half-sisters Suirei and Shisui had built together, but she strongly suspected Suirei was smart enough to have realized that she herself was one of the reasons Shisui had done what she did. Shisui may have wanted to help the country prosper, but she had also wanted to get her older sister out from under their mother’s thumb.

“I see...” Maomao said, her body going limp with disappointment. She’d finally dared to hope they might get some answers.

No—it was too soon to give up yet. “In that case, I’d like to know about the research on locusts that your mentor was doing.” Maomao placed the two volumes about insects in front of Suirei—but the other woman shook her head again.

“I had nothing to contribute to that research. I hate bugs. They were more *her* specialty.”

“Ah.”

Suirei had developed a phobia of snakes and bugs because of the “discipline”—really torture—she’d been subjected to. And the other girl to whom Suirei alluded was gone now. Maomao’s shoulders slumped again.

“When my mentor was ordered to create the elixir of immortality, almost all the research he’d done to that point was destroyed. He was able to preserve little more than what was in that room.”

So they’d destroyed his other work in order to make him focus on the elixir. Suirei’s mentor, intent on continuing the locust project, had used Sazen, who was in charge of obtaining supplies for him, to conduct some

investigations.

Suddenly Ah-Duo, who'd been silent throughout the conversation, spoke up. "Now I see." She set her teacup on the table and looked at Suirei. "'*She*' appears to have been a most intelligent young woman."

"It doesn't matter how intelligent she was. She's gone now." And nothing could bring her back. Suirei seemed to have resigned herself to her sister's disappearance. Maomao clenched a fist.

"And do you think someone so smart would have failed to leave something behind?"

Maomao's mind reeled. There was a bang: Maomao put a hand on the table as Suirei stood up abruptly.

"My apologies," Suirei said.

"Not at all. You don't need to be so stiff," Ah-Duo said. "I hate undue formality. Just relax. You know I don't stand on ceremony."

No, Maomao thought, this was an appropriate time for an apology. Nonetheless, what Ah-Duo had said teased at something in her memory. What was it? What *was* it?

She tried to think back. Something that had happened in the fortress? Or perhaps before that... Before that, in the rear palace. Or at the medical office? No, no. It must have been...

Maomao smacked the table. "The clinic! What about the clinic? What's happened to it?!"

Just before being kidnapped from the rear palace, Maomao had been at the clinic. That was where she'd seen it—a book on the bookshelf. An encyclopedia. About insects.

She was nothing if not thorough. Maomao pictured the young woman she would not see again and smiled. The idea that she'd found the one possible moment to show Maomao what she'd shown her overpowered the pain and made her smile wider.

With Shisui's grinning, mischievous face in her mind, Maomao gave the table a hearty smack.

The clinic had been temporarily closed, Maomao was told. It was possible that not all the women who worked there had been privy to the escape plan, but any who had been were guilty of a serious crime, and Shenlü's crime was the most serious of them all. She'd attempted to commit suicide, but had been

stopped and arrested.

Still, the rear palace couldn't go on without the clinic, and so it had been reopened, albeit with a eunuch overseer. Everything that had been at the facility at the time of Maomao's kidnapping, however, had been confiscated —including the encyclopedia.

"Is this what you're looking for?" Jinshi asked, handing her a book. He'd evidently gotten the day off. Outside the apothecary shop, Gaoshun accepted a cup of tea from one of the apprentices.

"If I may," Maomao said, taking the volume and flipping the pages until she found the place with the most marginal notes. She opened the book slowly, and a sheet covered in writing fell out. She set the book on the floor so that Jinshi could see it, then gently picked up the fallen sheet. "Yes, this is it."

The sheet was covered in detailed illustrations of insects. They all looked similar, and as the caption read "grasshoppers," that was probably what they were. Some of the illustrations showed the entire bug, while others were close studies of the legs or wings. There were even some colors, though they were a little faded.

The illustrations seemed to be divided into two broad categories, with perhaps a third if one were being precise. Maomao outlined them as she read through the text. "I gather this is a grasshopper's normal appearance," she said, pointing to a picture daubed with green. It was hard to tell from the full-body illustrations, but the wing studies made it appear the wings of these insects were a bit shorter than the other two types.

"And this is the kind that are expected to proliferate this year," she continued. "It's this variety that causes a plague of insects."

Jinshi was perfectly capable of reading the text himself, but Maomao still wanted to say it out loud. That helped the information lodge in her mind and made it easier to remember. Jinshi didn't stop her; perhaps he had the same idea.

The brown-colored grasshopper had longer wings than the green one.

Finally Maomao indicated the illustration in the center, whose size was in between the green and brown grasshoppers, its color likewise a blend of the two. "And the text speculates that these may have been the cause of the limited crop damage that occurred last year."

"In other words, a transitional stage to the brown grasshopper."

"So it appears."

Under certain circumstances, the grasshoppers' coloration and the shape of their wings changed. This change took place over the course of several generations, their number increasing with each successive brood. As to whether their bodies changed because of the increased population, or whether the population increased because of the changed body shape, the text ventured that it might be the former. In other words, the bugs that caused limited crop damage presaged much more serious destruction later.

"You're saying that there's going to be more widespread famine this year?"

"Yes, although we can't say just how big the scale will be."

Only that if they misjudged the situation, many, many people could die of hunger. "They're just bugs," one might scoff, but sometimes those bugs could block out the sun and consume every crop in sight. Maomao, born and raised in the capital, had never seen such a thing, but more than a few of the girls in the pleasure district were farmers' daughters who had been sold when just such a plague had left their families with nothing to eat.

And the timing could hardly have been worse. The entire nation was abuzz over the destruction of the Shi clan the previous year. If there were to be a major plague the year after the clan's extermination, it would bode ill for the country as a whole.

None of that was what Maomao or Jinshi were interested in, however. Rather, what they wanted to know was: if this person had been researching the insect plagues, had he devised a way to stop them?

Hrm...

However, none of the notations suggested any uniquely effective chemicals. They only advised that when small-scale crop destruction had occurred, it was crucial to deal with the problem before it advanced to the next stage. To that end, the text enumerated a few possibilities. All of them were close to a "human wave" strategy: the best thing was to destroy the insects while they were still in the larval stage, and the notes described how to make several insecticides that were deemed to be particularly effective. The ingredients were relatively easy to obtain—no doubt chosen because so much of the chemical would be necessary. If the insects had already matured, the text recommended setting up bonfires—an age-old method of dealing with bugs, particularly in the summer. They simply flew into the fire and

burned themselves up.

"All that, and we didn't really learn anything significant," Maomao remarked.

"I disagree—things could have been much worse had we gone along not knowing any of this. Even just the formula for insecticide can be considered a worthwhile result."

Jinshi scratched his head, but then produced a large map from his robe. It depicted the country of Li, from the capital in the center to the province of Shihoku-shu in the north, and even the western reaches. Several locations had been marked with circles in scarlet ink. The name of the central area, incidentally, was Kae-shu; how the name of Shihoku-shu, which included the very name of the Shi clan, might change in the future remained to be seen, but for the moment there seemed to be no move to alter it.

"These are the locations of farming villages that have reported crop damage," Jinshi said. "Do you notice anything about them?"

"I'm afraid I'm not sure what I'm supposed to notice," Maomao said. She'd heard that crop damage from insects often occurred out on the open plain, and indeed each of the indicated villages was on such a plain. "Perhaps being out on the plain gives the grasshoppers room to grow."

"Perhaps. But there hasn't been serious insect damage in this region in decades." Jinshi swept his finger around a particular part of the map—the northern lands that had formerly belonged to the Shi. The area boasted abundant natural resources and bordered on forests and mountains. Jinshi tapped his finger irritably on the forest.

"Wouldn't one normally expect a forest to be home to enough birds to eat the bugs?" Maomao said.

"Funny you should say that." Jinshi scratched his head awkwardly.

Shihoku-shu was, in principle, richly forested, but the timber in the area had already been stripped bare. The empress regnant had forbidden the untrammeled cutting down of the country's trees, but upon her death, it seemed some of the less scrupulous members of the Shi clan had resumed harvesting timber without informing the capital. They raised the price on what they sold domestically so as not to attract suspicion, and the rest they sold to neighboring nations. The deforestation had continued until the region's natural resources were badly depleted.

"Let me guess. Thanks to that, there are no more birds, which means

nothing to check a plague of insects."

"It seems a most reasonable guess."

Wow. That was depressing.

So at least part of Jinshi's despondency could be explained by his dashed hopes for Shihoku-shu's timber resources. He'd probably hoped to make up any shortfall in the crop by selling off wood and using the profits to purchase grain, but this pulled the rug out from under that plan.

Wait...

If he was right, then Maomao thought she could take a guess as to why the empress regnant had limited timber harvesting in the first place—but she would think about that later. Instead, she looked at the diagrams in the encyclopedia. Then she reviewed the formula for the insecticide several times, then finally stood up. She took a book from the shelf, paged through it, and showed it to Jinshi.

"I don't think this formula is going to yield enough chemical. I'll prepare something else as well, although it might not be as effective." Then she had another thought. "I don't suppose it would be possible to burn off the areas where larvae are found?"

"Hrm. Depends on the place, I guess. I agree fire might be the quickest way..."

She tried to think of any other suggestions. "All I can come up with is perhaps forbidding the hunting of sparrows."

Sparrows were routinely treated as pests themselves, but they ate insects, and that could prove important. If they could act before the grain ripened, it might be possible to limit the damage. But it seemed likely to provoke protests from those who hunted sparrows for a living.

It was hard to say how much destruction might be prevented if all of these ideas were put into practice. Of course, it might be that nothing happened in any case, but if so, it would only be a matter of good fortune. The role of those who practiced politics was to eliminate the possibility of crisis—even if people didn't always appreciate what they were doing.

"A ban on sparrow hunting? Introduce that too suddenly, and you might just have a rebellion on your hands," Jinshi said. Even here in the capital, there were places that specialized in "sparrow cuisine." It was a basic dish; you could find it anywhere. "Maybe if we had something to replace them with..."

Maomao had a flash of inspiration: “What if you were to convince people that grasshopper dishes are all the rage at court?” Then people would think the aristocrats were looking for grasshoppers for their food, and more people would catch them. And if the Emperor was eating them, the aristocrats who followed his whims would no doubt adopt the habit too.

There was just one problem: Jinshi was sitting there frozen, his usually gorgeous countenance ashen.

I can’t believe this guy, Maomao thought. She had half a mind to produce the rest of the simmered grasshoppers right here and now.

Jinshi finally moved again—but it was only to look up, press his fingers to his brow, and groan. He was, it seemed, conflicted. At last he said, “Perhaps we could consider that...a last resort.”

“If there aren’t too many of them, it won’t come up,” Maomao said, but she was a little disappointed. She could at least tell, though, that Jinshi was more set on doing something than he had been before. Apparently, he hated the idea of eating grasshoppers just that much.

A bit of a smile came over Maomao’s face—causing Jinshi to freeze again. “Ahem. Master Jinshi?”

“Y-Yes, what is it?” he managed, stuttering just a little.

“Won’t you have a meal before you go back?” Maomao said politely. Now she was grinning.

So it was that Jinshi decided to have dinner before he left. The apothecary shop was, of course, too small for proper meal service, so Maomao found an unused room for them. Naturally, she produced the remaining grasshoppers. She didn’t actually intend to make him eat them; it was just a bit of a joke. She had every intention of taking them away again the moment Jinshi seemed even the least bit upset by her jest. (And then there was Grams, glaring very pointedly at her.)

However...

“Say ahh!” Maomao grabbed one in her chopsticks and pretended to feed it to him with uncharacteristic gusto. Jinshi watched her silently.

Okay, maybe that’s enough, she thought—but just then, Jinshi, with only some hesitation, took a bite of the grasshopper Maomao had offered him as a joke. She felt herself grimace, and she wasn’t even the one eating it.

To watch Jinshi knit his brow and chew away was to feel that one was

seeing something that shouldn't be seen. It was different, in its way, from the time she'd witnessed him made up like a woman, but still, it felt like something that shouldn't exist in this world. Everyone else present seemed to have the same sense; they looked as if they had been struck by a collective lightning bolt.

Gaoshun's hands were shaking. The apprentice who'd brought the meal looked like she might burst into tears, as if she'd dropped her favorite doll in the mud. Chou-u, who'd come along to snatch some food, was frowning profoundly and shaking his head as if to say, *"This is bad news."* Even the madam wore a look of distaste.

Jinshi ignored them all as he chewed and swallowed. He still looked profoundly disturbed, but nonetheless he turned beseeching eyes on Maomao. "Congee."

"Ahem, right away, sir." She held out the bowl of congee to him, but Jinshi made no move to take it. Instead he looked from the congee to Maomao and back.

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Uh... It's gonna get cold. Maomao picked out some lotus, wondering what Jinshi was trying to get at. Maybe he didn't like the ingredients. Whatever the case, all he was doing was staring at the porridge. Then, finally, Jinshi practically ate the lotus out of her hand. Maomao didn't say anything, but she thought, *What is he, an infant?* She scooped up a bit of congee with the lotus; it looked in danger of spilling over, so she brought it to his mouth and he ate greedily.

Scowling, Maomao next picked up a grasshopper with her chopsticks. Jinshi frowned, too, but he took a bite of the insect nonetheless. Gaoshun could be heard to inhale sharply. There was a faint clatter as well: it was the apprentice, curling up on the floor on the verge of tears. Chou-u patted her back consolingly. Maomao wondered if the sight was really that shocking. Maybe it was too much for the eyes of children.

"I'm gonna get her out of here, Freckles. And mister, you oughta take some responsibility for yourself."

Jinshi was too busy chewing the grasshopper to reply. He certainly didn't look like he was enjoying the task, but when Maomao held out another to him, he obediently ate.

Chou-u led the little girl out of the room; by now there was snot pouring from her nose.

I've done a bad thing, Maomao thought. Jinshi, being as beautiful as he was, tried not to show his face more than was necessary even at the Verdigris House. The madam didn't want the courtesans seeing him, not if he wasn't going to provide any work for them. Thus, it was the little mute girl, the younger of the two sisters from the poor quarter, who'd brought his meal. She hadn't been formally sold, but rather than send her back to her father, they decided to let her stay at the Verdigris House. There was just one catch: the madam, needless to say, wasn't nearly altruistic enough to give free room and board, so she had the girl effectively doing the work of an apprentice. The child had a distinct timid streak, but again, if the alternative was to go back to her father, then she would rise to the work.

Chou-u, who saw himself as king of the brats, frequently interceded on behalf of the nervous apprentice. ("She's my loyal henchman, after all," he explained, as if they were in some sort of gang together.)

Jinshi, who at length had successfully swallowed the grasshopper, looked at Maomao again.

Yeah, okay, she thought and brought the lotus to his mouth once more.

After Jinshi had gone home, Chou-u appeared, now finished protecting the apprentice. “Hey, Freckles.”

To Maomao’s surprise, he was carrying a brush and some paper. “Where’d you get that paper?”

“Oh, Grams gave it to me.”

“That tightfisted old bag?” She counted every coin that came into her hands. Maomao highly doubted she’d simply give away something as luxurious as paper.

“Hey, all I know is, she said I could have it. Anyway, sit down over there.”

“What for?”

Maomao wanted to clean up the shop and get home already, not indulge the demands of some kid. She was about to try to shoo him away when she heard a weathered voice from behind her. “Bah, listen to Chou-u. Sleep here tonight. It would just be a lot of trouble to have to get another fire going when you get home, no? I’ve even got pajamas ready for you.”

“Grams, what’s going on here? Did seeing something that disturbing drive you insane?” Confronted with the madam acting nice, the words just sort of slipped out. Grams’s knuckles struck Maomao’s head with a speed one would never have expected from such an old woman. Despite having one foot in the grave, the old crone was still taller than Maomao, and the blow came down hard enough to send her reeling.

“Don’t question me. I laid out a bedroll in the room we used earlier. Take a bath before you go to sleep; it should still be warm.”

This smells fishy, Maomao thought, but it didn’t stop her from going to the room. As Chou-u spread out his paper, the madam solicitously prepared ink.

So *fishy.*

Maomao’s sisters Pairin and Joka were there, looking on, although Maomao couldn’t fathom why. They were both “taking tea” today. The other courtesans were busy entertaining customers.

“Grams, don’t you have to look after the incense?” Maomao asked.

“Oh, Ukyou’s taking care of it for me. It’ll be fine.”

Maomao was still puzzling over why they were all in this room when there was work to be done when Chou-u finished getting his brush ready and

just looked at her. “What?” she said.

“Tell me what kind of guy you like, Freckles,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

Of all the things she’d thought he might say, she hadn’t expected anything that stupid. She took the pajamas out of the basket and started to get ready to bathe. The madam, however, tugged on her sleeve to stop her. “Come on, be serious,” she said.

“Maomao, my dear, you mustn’t argue with our lovely madam,” Pairin said. Even she was getting in on it!

Joka was smoking a pipe with a disaffected expression. Customers would be coming to the brothel at this hour, but this room was used especially for those who wanted to be discreet, and the chances of anyone stumbling across them were minimal. Even the madam didn’t seem disposed to grumble about Maomao’s rudeness.

“Come on, Freckles, cough it up. What kind? Do you like ’em tall? With lots of muscles?”

I can’t believe I’m doing this, Maomao thought, but she decided that it would be best just to play along. She sat on the mattress and said, “I prefer them not to be too tall.” Her feet were cold, so she stuck them under the covers.

“Huh! Okay,” Chou-u said.

“And I’d rather they have a bit of meat on their bones, as opposed to being too thin.”

With a man who was too tall, the diminutive Maomao would strain her neck looking up at him. And if he was too scrawny, people would think she wasn’t feeding him, and she didn’t want that.

“What about facial hair?”

“I don’t mind it, but not too thick.”

A mustache or beard could be seen as manly, but to Maomao’s mind it was just as likely to communicate filth. She was always annoyed when she saw a man who’d neglected his grooming so badly that he still had rice in his beard.

“Let’s talk about faces.”

“Soft, not sharp.” She didn’t want someone with the intense, cunning look of a fox—in fact, she hated it. Such people, in her opinion, could die in a fire.

“So soft their eyebrows droop?”

“You can take artistic license on that one.”

“Hmm. About like this, then?” Chou-u said, holding up the paper so they could see it.

“Gosh, a little boring, isn’t he?” said Pairin, who liked burlier men.

“A little *sheltered*, judging by that face,” said the madam, unimpressed.

“Wow. No way,” was all Joka had to say. Although she was one of the Three Princesses, there was one major catch that could make her tough to deal with as a courtesan: she absolutely hated men. She dismissed most of them out of hand.

Finally, Maomao got a good look at the portrait, and went completely silent.

“What’s the matter?” the madam asked, eyeing her.

“Nothing. I was just struck by the resemblance.”

“Resemblance! Maomao, have you got your eye on a *special someone*?” Pairin teased, but the madam looked no more pleased than before.

True, she didn’t hate him, as they said.

“Who is this man, exactly?” the madam inquired.

“Well... *Man* might not quite be the right word.” He was a eunuch, after all. “The picture... It looks exactly like the physician at the rear palace.”

There was a long beat in which everyone registered this rather dispiriting answer. Then they all promptly left the room.

“What a letdown,” said Pairin, who’d been all set to dig into some talk of romance. Now completely disenchanted, she was the first to leave. She glanced at Maomao as she went, but Maomao pretended not to notice. Then the madam exited, likewise looking as if nothing could interest her less. Chou-u, meanwhile, headed to the bath.

At last only Joka was left with Maomao, smoking her pipe. The older woman opened a window, letting in a breath of cold air. A half-moon floated in the sky, which was as dark as a pool of spilled ink and speckled with stars. From their vantage point they could see other windows in which were the silhouettes of men and women. A succession of romances being born this evening here in this brothel, destined to fade with the morning light.

Joka looked at Maomao, purple smoke drifting from between her lips. “I can’t say I don’t sympathize with you. Men! You never know when their feelings will change. And if they’re powerful, they’re only that much worse.”

She set down her pipe, the movement diffident and yet beautiful. Joka was

the youngest of the Three Princesses, and customers deeply valued the education she'd been given as a woman with potential. Some claimed that if you could keep up with Joka's conversation, you could expect to pass the civil service examinations, and her regulars included rich young men who hoped to take the tests.

"If you were more like our older sister Pairin, I wouldn't stop you. She's a bit of a devil lady. But you, you're different. Pairin gets impatient, but I wish she'd understand that you're not her. If anything, Maomao, you're more like me."

Maomao thought she understood what Joka was getting at. It was almost certainly...

"You'll never find some fine prince whose heart will never change. That's one lesson you can't escape here. What does trust ever get you?" Joka picked up her pipe and settled the ashes inside, then she packed in some more tobacco and took a coal from the brazier. White smoke enveloped her. "When you come down to it, I'm a whore, and you're a whore's daughter."

That was the reality of it.

Maomao looked at the ashes dropped in the brazier and felt a slight furrow form in her brow. "Sis, don't you think that's enough smoking?"

"It's fine, now and again. The thing about these somber bureaucrats is, they hate to see a woman with a pipe."

When she wasn't entertaining customers, at least, she was going to do what she liked. As if to prove the point, she took another long drag on her pipe and breathed the smoke out into the sky.

Chapter 7: The White-Snake Immortal

It all started with a story related by a customer.

“Well, at least that explains why there’ve been so few patrons lately,” Maomao’s older sister Meimei said, reclining on her side as she placed a Go stone on a board. The apprentice assigned to her sat on the other side of the board, looking nervous as she set some stones on it. It seemed they were working life-and-death strategy problems.

“Big, important men can’t get enough of strange and novel things,” Joka said, breathing out some pipe smoke. Maomao, meanwhile, was preparing her tools; her sisters had asked her to do moxibustion for them. These women’s lives were hard, and sometimes they needed a chance to relax and let off steam. Hence days like today, when they had no real work to do.

Meimei said it was the man she’d been playing Go with the night before who’d told her. He claimed there was someone even more striking than the Three Princesses of the Verdigris House around, a young woman who seemed to be a mystical immortal.

“I guess we’re too old for them these days,” Joka nearly spat. “And to think, they used to treat us like jewels!”

“Yes, of course,” Maomao said placatingly as she encouraged Joka to lie on her stomach and began placing herbs in specific spots around her body before lighting them. “Ahhh,” Joka moaned sensually. Her toes nearly curled. Maomao wished she could reassure her sister that she was still more than woman enough.

“He said her hair is pure white,” Meimei told them. “And if that were it, well, you might say, so she’s a girl with white hair. But... He said her eyes are bright red, as well.”

White hair and red eyes? That was indeed unusual, Maomao acknowledged with a nod. Finished with Joka, she began to place the moxa on Meimei. Meimei stretched a slim leg out from under the hem of her robe. Maomao rolled the fabric aside carefully so it wouldn’t get scorched, then lit the herbs.

“Not just white hair, but red eyes too? So she’s an albino?” Maomao asked.

“Probably,” Meimei said, she and Joka both nodding. The apprentice holding the Go stones, not quite able to follow, tugged on Maomao’s sleeve. It was the girl who’d nearly been reduced to tears by the sight of Jinshi eating the grasshoppers. Her name, Maomao had learned, was Zulin. Her older sister’s name was similar, but the older girl intended to change her name to symbolize her break with her father. And Maomao had no intention of bothering to remember a name that was only going to change soon.

Maomao gave the girl a look, but when she saw the child flinch back, she gave in. “Very rarely, a person is born without skin color. Their skin and hair are both white, and their eyes look red because you can see the blood inside them. We call them albinos.”

It happened in animals too. White snakes and foxes were considered auspicious, and venerated as gods—but what about people? Maomao had heard of a far land in which albino children were said to be considered panaceas and were sometimes eaten. She didn’t give the story any credence, though. Maomao’s old man Luomen had told her that the white hair and skin represented nothing more than a lack of coloration; otherwise, albinos were the same as anyone else.

Once, just one time, Maomao had caught a white snake. It was one of the strangest creatures she’d ever encountered. As for this albino woman, it seemed fascination with her had led people to treat her as an immortal. In other words, she was taken as a good sign rather than a bad one.

“Those pompous assholes will get tired of her soon enough,” Joka said.

“I don’t know,” Meimei replied, sticking out her other leg. “They claim she really can use immortal arts.”

That caused Maomao to cock an eyebrow. According to Meimei’s story, this woman could read people’s minds and transform metals. That sounded as preposterous as anything Maomao had ever heard, but fools and their money were soon parted—especially fools with a lot of money. The “immortal” had started in a small exhibition space, but now she was renting out the capital’s biggest theater.

She put on only one show each night, and the moneyed men who usually patronized the pleasure quarter were lining up to see her instead. The ladies here might well complain. And when one of their customers finally did show

up after a prolonged absence, all he could talk about was the unearthly beauty of this female immortal and her incredible powers. Hardly the stuff to light the fires of romance.

The drop of twenty percent in the brothel's income was enough to make the madam smack her pipe on whatever was nearby. The middle-class courtesans were seeing as many customers as ever, but the Verdigris House was a high-class brothel. It lived and died on whether it could attract the best customers.

"Who needs to see a show more than once?" Maomao muttered.

She'd intended the remark for herself, but Ukyou, the chief manservant, replied, "Oh, you'd be surprised."

Ukyou, a man of about forty, had had his hands full recently looking after both Chou-u and Sazen. It looked like he had finally managed to catch a breath just before the lanterns went up for the night. He was munching on a big meat bun in lieu of a late lunch. Maomao offered him some tea (brewed from leftover leaves); he said "Thanks" and took a sip to wash down his food. "You know about *liandan-shu*, right?"

"You're bringing this up now?"

Liandan-shu was an art which sought to help a person achieve a state of immortality. It had been enough to make Maomao's eyes sparkle when her old man had told her about it, but he'd been quick to add that she must never attempt it. It could be a dubious practice indeed.

"You're saying she pretends to have the power of immortality?"

"Maybe. She's got that unusual appearance, and they say she can read people's minds."

"Ah."

The great and powerful might arrive skeptical, but when this woman told them what they were thinking, how must they feel? Any sense of being made a fool of might be transmuted, as it were, into faith. And that might convince them that some elixir of immortality really did exist.

But if that isn't the stupidest thing I've ever heard...

Maomao did know of someone who, after many attempts to create an elixir of immortality, had succeeded in producing a "resurrection" drug. Quite an achievement, as a physician, but the side effects still left much to be desired.

Maomao clenched her fists. She knew it was pointless to wish that

physician were here, but if he were, he might have been able to give them a better idea of how to prevent any damage from the plague of insects. The disaster wasn't yet upon them. If they could do something now, they might be able to change things. Jinshi and his immediate acquaintances were busy racking their brains for any possible preventative measures, but the rest of the nation's important people took the matter lightly at best.

Maomao wondered about this woman's alleged abilities. "So, what? She claims to have an elixir of immortality, and that's how she attracts customers?"

"No idea," Ukyou said. "I just got wind of what the big wigs' bodyguards were saying." He stuffed the rest of his meat bun into his mouth, washing it down with the rest of the tea. It was time to go light the lanterns. "If you're so curious, why don't you go see the show?"

"You think I'd pay that much to see that little?"

"Beg someone to take you, then?" He winked amicably and left.

Beg who*?* Maomao thought, grunting in disgust. *Nobody has that much time on their hands.*

Several days later, Maomao had an unexpected visitor.

"Of all the people I thought might show up, I never imagined him," Ukyou said, scratching his chin. He was frequently at the Verdigris House these days to look after the kids. No sooner had he brought the visitor to Maomao than he disappeared again.

"Yes... Of *all* the people..." Maomao said.

"I'll thank you to be a little more polite," the visitor huffed. He was a diminutive man with round spectacles framing sharp, fox-like eyes, and he carried an abacus. His name was Lahan—yes, of the La clan. He was the nephew and adopted son of the eccentric strategist, and he had come to invite Maomao to see the infamous show. He even had some friends to come with them.

"I didn't know you had any interest in...entertainment," said Maomao, who'd produced tepid tea steeped from some leftover leaves, purely for form's sake.

"When all the world seems interested, how could I not be intrigued?" Lahan slid his glasses up his nose pointedly.

Beside him stood a man Maomao didn't recognize, smiling broadly.

Probably not quite thirty, he had delicate features and a composed expression. Maomao gave him a quick but polite dip of the head before returning to her conversation with Lahan.

"They say this albino woman is quite beautiful," he remarked. Maomao knew full well that Lahan had no special interest in beautiful things. Unlike ordinary men, he claimed to see beauty in the form of numbers. Evidently the adopted son of the eccentric was rather unusual himself.

"And you're inviting me, why?"

"Don't tell me it doesn't interest you."

He was right about that, at least. But what did Lahan stand to gain by bringing her along? Maomao glanced around.

"If you're worried about my father, he's not here. And he won't be *there*."

"You mean it?" Maomao wouldn't have put it past Lahan to use her as a sacrificial lamb to curry favor with the eccentric strategist.

"I mean it. However, one of his subordinates is with us." Lahan indicated the man beside him. Maomao scowled before she could stop herself.

"Don't look at me like that," the young man said, wounded. "Lak—" He was about to say the name, but with one look at Maomao's face he quickly covered it with a cough. "Ahem. May I, er, refer to him as the strategist?"

Maomao's expression returned to something that bore looking at directly, causing the man to breathe a sigh of relief. "I'm the strategist's subordinate. My name is Rikuson."

"Maomao," she said after a beat.

"Yes, I've heard of you."

Maomao gave Lahan a good, hard stare. Why wasn't the eccentric here himself? Why send someone in his place? The frizzy-haired, bespectacled man spread his arms helplessly. "It doesn't look like my father will be leaving his house for a while." It didn't seem like this fact made his life easy.

"Huh." That remark sounded significant, but Maomao didn't foresee anything good for her coming of pursuing it. "I still don't know why you're inviting me along." Lahan never did anything without calculating the potential benefit; he was the only person Maomao knew who could give the old madam a run for her money for sheer miserliness.

"There are going to be some dealings with the west coming up, and we were thinking of asking this troupe to perform for them."

"Keep going."

“There will be women among the delegation, you see, and I thought it would be wise to get a woman’s perspective on the performance.”

“Bullshit,” Maomao shot back. Yes, Rikuson was there, but she didn’t care; she had no intention of minding her manners just because one of the strategist’s lackeys was around.

Lahan spread his hands again, more deliberately this time. Frankly, the gesture was annoying. She suspected he’d only given her that excuse to see if she’d call his bluff.

Suddenly, Rikuson broke in: “Actually...” He looked uneasy. Anxious, even. Not sure how to explain himself. “My...ahem. My superior. The strategist. He let slip that...he is indeed curious about that. It’s that simple.”

Rikuson, motivated by what had apparently been a passing remark, had begun to investigate this troupe of entertainers. He found no basis for what the strategist had said, unless it was the man’s own vaguely supernatural instincts.

“But I did hear a rumor about them that made me wonder,” he said, and then with a look of wonder, he proceeded to relate the story he’d heard.

I hope this doesn’t turn out to be more trouble, Maomao thought as she pulled on a cotton padded jacket, an excellent item she’d gotten for free at the clothing shop. The color was louder than she would usually have preferred, but she wasn’t about to turn down free clothes—nor fail to use them.

Suitably warm, she went outside to the waiting carriage. It was already dark, and snowflakes drifted through the sky. She’d instructed Ukyou to give Chou-u dinner; if she’d told the kid where she was going, he would only have demanded to come with.

“Shall we be off?” Rikuson asked, politely opening the door of the carriage for her as if for a princess. Lahan was already seated inside. He was wearing a different pair of spectacles from normal—perhaps his idea of dressing up. Rikuson sat down beside him, and then the driver cracked the reins.

The theater where the alleged mystic was performing was on the eastern edge of the central part of the capital. Located near the high-class residences, this was the poshest part of a city whose every corner bristled with shops. This building, though, was usually used for performing theater troupes; a

single woman—even a supposed immortal—putting on a show by herself was most unusual.

She seems to be one popular mystic, Maomao thought: when they disembarked the carriage, a whole crowd of people was already lining up. A man was taking coins and leading customers inside.

The woman was known as *Pai-niangniang*, "the White Lady," after her appearance. It was a rather sumptuous name for a simple performer.

"What's this about?" Maomao asked—though she hadn't intended to say it out loud. All of the patrons were dressed in finery, but most of them had covered their faces with veils or weird masks, only a few going without.

Lahan covered Maomao's head with a veil that was pleasant to the touch, and then he, Rikuson, and the brawny man serving as their bodyguard all put on masks that hid half their faces.

"It's the done thing," Lahan explained. "Things go so much better when you have a little something to give you a pretext for pretending you don't recognize anyone."

In other words, some of the rich and important people drawn to this show might enjoy themselves a little too much. Or perhaps this was part of the allure of the carnival atmosphere: the chance to give yourself over to the sense of the uncanny.

She must have sponsors, Maomao thought when she saw what the tickets cost—it would be tough to rent out such a fine theater at these prices. Even most full theatrical shows were backed by sponsors; a one-person show by a traveling performer would need them that much more. Meanwhile, Maomao could hardly notice something having to do with economics that escaped Lahan; she could see him glancing around, the abacus working in his head.

Inside, there was a stage, with a couple dozen tables set up in front of it. The ceiling was vaulted so that there was a decent view from the second floor. The place could probably hold a hundred or more spectators. There were buildings at the rear palace that were bigger and permitted more people, but this one had been designed to ensure that everyone had some kind of view of the stage. In deference to the audience, the pillars and rafters were carved with delicate, lovely patterns.

A huge lantern hung from the ceiling, bathing the space in a murky glow. Maomao and the others were seated on the left side, two rows from the stage. The tables seated four, meaning that with their bodyguard, they had the

perfect number. The front-and-center seats were occupied by a corpulent man and the young woman hanging off his arm.

"The center section is the most popular. Drives the price to outrageous levels," Lahan informed her, obviously annoyed. But the seats they were in couldn't have been cheap either. It must have been a source of irritation for such a penny-pincher.

"I think we could have stood to be a little farther back," Rikuson said. True, the best seats implied something about the power and wealth of their occupants—it was clear that the man in the front-and-center spot had plenty of money, if nothing else. (Maomao seemed to recall a merchant who'd been living large in the pleasure quarter recently, someone not too dissimilar to him.)

Almost as soon as they sat down, smiling waitresses accosted them with drinks, and some baked cakes were provided as a snack. An unusual combination, Maomao observed. She gave the drink an experimental sniff.

"It's alcohol. Not going to drink?" Lahan asked.

In fact, Maomao liked alcohol. But she wanted to have a clear head when she saw this White Lady.

"Later. Or would you prefer I check it for poison?" she said.

"Don't bother." Lahan likewise set his drink on the table—he wasn't much better at holding his liquor than the eccentric strategist was. Rikuson, taking his cue from Lahan, showed no sign of touching his refreshments.

"You don't want to drink?" Maomao asked him.

"It wouldn't do for me to be the only one who ended up less than sober."

And of course the bodyguard wouldn't imbibe—although his mouth, not hidden by his mask, revealed his disappointment at the fact.

A quick glance around suggested the alcohol was quite tasty, and judging by the number of people taking bites of the snack cakes, the two went well together. Maomao, though thinking Rikuson didn't have to be quite so considerate, directed her attention to the stage.

A white mist drifted through the dim room. At the sound of a gong, the main act appeared on the stage like a beam of light. Her skin was white, her clothes were white, and her white hair wasn't tied up but was allowed to cascade down her back. Against this field of white, her red lips and eyes stood out starkly.

As the sound of the gong echoed around the room, the White Lady moved

to the center of the stage, where a beautiful desk waited for her. She stood in front of it, then picked up a piece of paper lying on it and showed it to the audience; it contained a diagram showing the stage and the desk itself.

A man dressed in white came on stage. His hair was black, but otherwise his appearance was much like the Lady's; he was obviously her assistant. He took the diagram from her and stuck it to a wall on stage. Then he turned toward it and tossed something at it—some sort of throwing weapon, perhaps. The long, thin object pierced the paper and stuck. The wall had obviously been prepared ahead of time to make it easy to stick the knife in it.

There was now a hole in the paper. It was, in fact, precisely in the location of the second row on the left. "Who, may we ask, is sitting in this seat?" the assistant inquired.

"That's us, isn't it?" Lahan asked Maomao.

"Yes, sir, it would seem so," she replied.

"What should we do about it?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, sir..."

Lahan had scant interest in the subject, and Rikuson hardly seemed like the type to clown around onstage. Their guard, of course, was there to, well, guard them.

"How about *you* go up?" Lahan said, pointing at Maomao. "It's a perfect chance to see her at work up close."

Maomao was quiet for a moment, wondering what she should do, but she decided this was an opportunity she couldn't miss. "I'll be back in a few minutes, then," she said, and walked up on stage.

The White Lady seemed even more brilliant under the flickering light of the lantern, her skin so pale that the veins were visible beneath it. This was clearly not someone simply pretending to be albino by dusting themselves with powder.

"Please write down a number. Any number," she said, her voice barely audible. The man beside her repeated the instruction loudly enough for the entire theater to hear. The Lady continued, "Please don't let me see what you write. Fold up the paper when you're done, small enough that no one can see what's on it."

Then she and her assistant both turned their backs on Maomao. Maomao took the brush that was provided and began to write—it was already loaded with ink, so much that it was almost difficult to write with. The slightly

unpleasant feeling of the ink suggested they hadn't gone out of their way to get particularly high-quality writing implements. There was a pad on the desk so the ink didn't soak through.

They didn't have to make the ink so tacky, Maomao thought. It felt almost gritty. Just one of those weird things that bothered her.

When she had written a number, she folded the paper up and said, "I'm done."

The White Lady and her assistant turned back around. The man took the desk offstage and replaced it with something brought in on a clattering cart. It looked like a box with a collection of strange cylinders shoved into the bottom. A hundred cylinders, arranged in ten rows and ten columns.

"May I ask you to push the paper into one of those tubes?" the White Lady said, and then she and the man turned around again. Maomao didn't think that was really necessary; the tubes weren't visible either from the stage or the spectator seats. Nonetheless, she balled the paper up even smaller and pressed it into one of the tubes. The paper was soft, but the pipe was narrow and she had to work a bit to do it. With a good shove, she managed it, though she didn't envy the person who had to pull it out again. When she was done, she placed a thin veil over the box so the tubes couldn't be seen.

Then the Lady's assistant took the box, moving it to another desk in a corner of the stage. The veil, thin and light as it was, billowed as he went.

"It is ready," he announced, and immediately there was a thunderous clang of the gong. It caught Maomao by surprise, and she was glad she was wearing a veil herself so no one could see her eyes widen.

As for the White Lady, she smiled and held out her hand. Maomao took the hint and held out her own hand; she felt pale, chilly fingers grasp her wrist. This time there was a jangling of bells. The White Lady stared intently at Maomao.

Ah... She must have poor eyesight, Maomao thought, noticing that the Lady's eyes occasionally flitted in different directions. Her eyes had no pigment, either. *Life must be tough for her.*

As Maomao was getting lost in thought, though, the White Lady said, "The number you wrote is seven."

Maomao jumped. "That's correct."

The red lips twisted into a leer. When Maomao met those crimson eyes, they made her think of the white snake she'd caught once long ago. It, too,

had had red eyes and white skin. When she had tried to roast it, her old man had gotten mad at her; he'd said it was a messenger of the gods and she couldn't eat it. Maomao knew it was no divine messenger. It was an animal that happened to have white skin for entirely mundane reasons. But her father, to her frustration, could sometimes be like that, bringing up illogical arguments at the most unlikely times.

Just as Maomao threatened to be swallowed up by those large, round eyes, the gong sounded again. Maybe it was the fog in the room that made her feel so warm, made her head hurt. She felt a flash of irritation at the sensation that a fly was buzzing around her ears, but then the White Lady spoke again.

"The third row from the top, second from the left."

Maomao paused.

"Well?"

The assistant removed the veil to reveal to the audience what was in the box. He took the tube three rows down from the top and two from the left and drove a thin stick through it.

Pop! The paper Maomao had shoved into it came flying out. The man unfolded it to reveal the number seven—in Maomao's own writing, of course.

Maomao went back to her seat, pondering what could be going on. The room was full of boisterous, cheerful voices; much of the audience seemed to be pleasantly drunk. Lahan and the others, though, were waiting studiously for Maomao to return.

"So tell me, what *was* that?" Lahan asked, now full of enthusiasm.

"Search me."

"Wait... Did she slip a little coin into your hand, perchance?"

"Unlike *some* of us, I don't work that way."

"Well, neither do I! There's no beauty in it."

This man made no sense to Maomao—he adored even the smallest coins, yet he claimed there was a distinction between beauty and impurity in them. But she noticed Rikuson chuckling to himself.

"You can see I've got nothing," Maomao said, opening her hands and rolling up her sleeves to prove she hadn't been bought off.

"Did someone see you, then?"

"I really doubt it."

Only the White Lady and her assistant had been up on stage with her. Maomao didn't think anyone had observed her writing the number, and which pipe she'd put the paper into had been obscured by the cloth. *But maybe...* she thought.

She glanced toward the stage, which was bathed in the uneven glow of the lantern hanging from the ceiling. She'd thought perhaps there was a mirror in which the performers could see which number she'd written, but it didn't seem to be the case. It looked like it would have been hard to hang anything of the sort from the ceiling—and anyway, you would need to *have* something of the sort in the first place.

Above all, though, the White Lady's eyes were too bad for that. Everything more than a *shaku* in front of her probably looked hazy. Maomao was still contemplating it when the next part of the performance began. A new desk was brought out and a variety of utensils arranged on it. The Lady used a pair of chopsticks to pick up a small, thin piece of metal from among them. She chose a dish as well.

Her assistant took the metal and the dish, set them on a tray, and began walking around the theater with them. The piece of metal appeared to be no more than a sheet of polished bronze; the dish, meanwhile, was deeply recessed so that the liquid in it wouldn't spill. The assistant skipped the second floor—evidently, he didn't have time to make his way all the way up there—provoking a few shouts of protest from above. But that, in Maomao's opinion, was just what you got for sitting in the cheap seats.

When the man returned to the stage, the White Lady took the metal sheet and the dish back from him. Then she placed the metal in the dish and placed the dish in a fire that had been lit almost without anyone noticing. She began chanting what sounded like a spell of some kind, then started to dance. In the gloomy, misty room, her entire body seemed to shine.

When the dance was over, the Lady took the chopsticks and removed the piece of metal from the fire.

The color's changed. The reddish hue of the bronze had become a pure silver. Several people in the front row exclaimed with wonder.

"The bronze turned into silver!" someone shouted.

"What? Really?!"

Those in the back couldn't quite see what was happening on stage, but they could see other people's reactions, and pressed forward with interest.

The guards managed to keep anyone from mounting the stage, but that was plenty close enough to see what was going on.

The Lady was bathing the metal in some sort of liquid, then wiping it dry with a cloth. This time she exposed it directly to the fire.

The shouting grew louder: “The silver’s changed to gold!”

Indeed, the silver sheet had turned to shimmering gold. The Lady shook it with the chopsticks, getting the heat out as she placed it on the dish. Her assistant held it up so everyone could see the shining gold clearly.

“Are you able to explain that?” Lahan asked Maomao, wiping his spectacles.

Maomao smirked. “Yes—later. For now, let’s enjoy the show.” Her eyes were sparkling—in fact, she was loath to look away from the performance on stage. With Lahan, her voice took on an edge that she normally reserved for use in the pleasure quarter; it might have sounded a little strange to Rikuson, but considering that he served someone very strange indeed, maybe he was willing not to let it bother him.

Maomao had other things on her mind, anyway. *This is fascinating*, she thought, so eager to see the panoply of unusual techniques on display that she almost forgot to blink. The woman might not be an immortal, but it was clear they couldn’t dismiss her out of hand.

The White Lady proceeded to show them a wide variety of intriguing entertainments. She placed a wet stone on a piece of paper and recited a spell over it, shortly after which they burst into flames. She produced butterflies seemingly out of thin air, and as they were flying away they, too, appeared to incinerate themselves, turning to ash in mid-flight. Each display earned a chorus of *ooh*s and *ahh*s from the audience.

Finally, the Lady held up a shimmering silver liquid. With every eye in the house fixed on the mysterious substance, she poured it into a small cup and drank it down.

Maomao almost choked, barely resisting the urge to jump out of her seat. Thankfully she stopped herself before she got to her feet, and instead focused intently on the Lady.

“I hope you’ve had another enjoyable evening at my show,” the Lady said with a smile, and then descended the stage. The audience members, meanwhile, continued to fill the theater with excited chatter about what

they'd just witnessed. Some people's eyes flickered as if with flames, while others looked adoringly at the spot where the immortal had just been. Only Maomao's group seemed less engaged than the rest, perhaps in part because they hadn't indulged in the wine.

"She certainly is something special," Rikuson remarked, finally reaching for his cup. Maomao, though, instinctively stopped him, looking at him uneasily. "Is something the matter?" he asked.

"Yes," Maomao said, and took her own cup in her hand. She sniffed it, then put a single drop of the wine on her skin. When she saw how it behaved, she lapped up the smallest mouthful of the drink. "It's mixed with something," she said. There wasn't much actual alcohol in it. It was closer to juice—very drinkable, but it also had several other, conflicting flavors. It seemed the drinks had been adulterated with several other substances, perhaps including some salt.

"It's not poisonous," Maomao said. But in spite of how modest the alcohol content was, it seemed likely to pack a punch. That was all there was to it.

Then there was the wavering lantern light. The darkened room. The eerie mist and phantasmal woman on stage. The strange phenomena the audience had witnessed.

Well, now.

This was all more than enough to inspire blind faith in someone. Maomao wondered how many of the audience members had been moved to exactly that. As she mulled it over, she continued to sip at her drink. *It's definitely a little salty*, she thought. It would be better without, she reflected—and that was when it hit her.

She plunged a finger into her drink, then ran it over the tabletop, using the juice like ink.

"What are you doing?" Lahan asked.

"You wanted to know what's going on? Here it is." Maomao looked around at them. *If that stuff's like this, then* that *must have some trick to it too.* She wished she'd looked around more closely when she was on stage. Had there been something there? It had been mistier up there than in the seats —warmer, making her head hurt and interfering with her concentration in some odd way.

Mist... Fog...

She suspected it was steam, maybe from something being boiled behind the stage. That would explain the heat too. But why did it make her head hurt, then? She'd felt like there had been a fly buzzing around her ears. What was that?

Hm? Just as she felt she was getting an inkling of what it might be, she caught a glimpse of the White Lady in the wings of the stage. Maomao stuck her fingers in her mouth, closed her lips, and blew.

"What are you whistling for? What a base way to show your appreciation." Lahan was looking at her with narrowed eyes.

Maomao's whistle hadn't been very loud, while the chatter around her was noisy. The sound shouldn't have carried far. And yet, she saw the Lady look around when she whistled.

Hah. Now I get it. Maomao grinned and started in on the snack cakes.

It was cold outside. They could easily have waited until they got back to the Verdigris House to talk about what they had seen, but Lahan and the others seemed eager to learn what was going on as soon as possible, so they decided to stop at a restaurant and talk there. Maomao picked a place on the expensive side, which left Lahan less than thrilled, but she couldn't care less. A waiter showed them to their seats, and once they were seated around a round table, Maomao asked for whatever dishes the waiter recommended along with a bottle of their finest alcohol.

"Ever heard of moderation?" Lahan grumbled.

"The big earner says what?"

"My family bought something very expensive just last year; we're practically broke."

She knew that perfectly well—he'd bought it from the Verdigris House.

First, Maomao elected to explain how the White Lady had changed bronze into silver and gold.

"It's very similar to what they call transmutation."

Maybe she should have simply said "liandan-shu." In fact, making gunpowder fell under the same category. Transmutation was a subcategory of liandan-shu, a way of turning base metals into noble ones.

Maomao played with the spoon the waiter had brought. The art of liandan-shu was aimed at prolonging people's lives, but many of the things attributed to it were pure bunk. The histories told of an ancient emperor obsessed with

gaining immortality, who had instead lost his life trying misguided ways of obtaining it.

Yes, the two were quite similar. “But if I had to distinguish them, I would say it’s closer to what they call *alchemy* in the west.”

“The west?” Lahan asked, and Maomao nodded.

“Yeah.” Lahan seemed to be thrown off by the fact that Maomao spoke more politely to Rikuson than to him. Maybe she could speak casually to Rikuson by now as well, Maomao reflected. “My old man told me about it, but I’ve never seen it with my own eyes before. That piece of metal did *not* turn into actual silver or gold. It simply had a metal plating on it that could be scorched off in the fire to change it from one to the other.”

Maomao had wanted to try it herself, but her old man had refused to tell her the necessary ingredients. Though she suspected that even if he had, they wouldn’t have been things she could get in a humble apothecary’s shop.

“What are you saying? What’s this ‘plating’?”

“It’s when you enclose one metal in a ‘shell’ of another metal,” Maomao said, pinching the spoon between the fingers of both hands. “If you’d like to know more, you should ask my father. And if you’d be so kind as to tell me what you learn... No, you *must* tell me.” Her eyes flashed.

The self-burning paper could be accounted for with the byproducts of that process, and if the butterflies had been made of paper as well, that might explain them. Moreover, the audience’s vision had been impaired by the mist in the theater, and they’d been drinking wine specifically made to induce a drunken stupor. Even she and Lahan and the others, who hadn’t been drinking, had practically been taken in; none of the other tipsy spectators would have suspected anything.

Incidentally, the paper butterflies sounded a lot like a traditional trick from the island country to the east. It involved cutting shapes out of a very thin, high-quality paper.

“Explain how she was able to read your mind, then,” Lahan said, still puzzled.

“Yes, about that...” Maomao was just trying to decide how to explain when the waiter returned with their pre-meal soup.

Maybe this will work, Maomao thought, and plunged her spoon into the soup bowl.

“Paper,” she said.

“Look at you, giving orders,” Lahan said, scowling at her, but nonetheless he produced some paper from the folds of his robe and handed it to her. Maomao ran the soup-laden spoon over the paper, producing a childish scrawl. She gave the paper a quick wave to dry it out, whereupon the scrawl disappeared.

“Do you see it?” she asked.

“The wet areas have shrunk slightly.”

“Bit too close an observation, there.”

“Bah. Show some respect to your adopted brother.”

Absolutely not.

Rikuson spoke up. “So, er, what *does* this have to do with what we saw?”

“Watch.” Maomao went over to one of the lanterns on the wall, gently removed the frame, and held the paper over the naked flame.

Lahan and Rikuson looked shocked—and while that was gratifying, this shouldn’t have been new to them. Jinshi and Gaoshun would have understood much sooner, Maomao thought. The soup-strewn parts of the page had singed and darkened in the flame.

“You see?”

“Hardly. What does this have to do with reading someone’s mind?”

Maomao shoved the spoon into Lahan’s mouth. “How’s it taste?”

“Like they used seafood stock. And a little salty.”

“Yes. It has salt in it.”

“So what?”

Well, there was *salt* in it. Specifically, in that grainy ink she’d used. No wonder it had felt so unpleasant to write with.

“There was salt in the ink. Blend it in well enough, and you wouldn’t necessarily see it, just like you don’t see it in this soup. But it was there, just like it is here.” Putting it to a flame clearly revealed that there was more than just water present.

“You’re saying she singed the paper to reveal the number? How?”

“No, she didn’t—but there are other ways.”

There had been a dark writing pad under the paper Maomao had used. Plenty of ink would have soaked into it.

Lahan looked at the slightly blackened paper, tracing the lines with his finger. “So that’s what was going on.”

“Yes. I believe so. It was something mixed into the ink.” It didn’t have to

be salt; anything that could be blended with the ink but then remained behind when the ink dried would do. Suppose for the sake of argument that it was salt. Maomao would have written her number with the salty ink, which would have soaked through into the pad underneath. When the ink dried, the salty numeral would have appeared, a pattern of white powder on the dark writing pad.

"I see, I see," Rikuson said, clapping his hands in understanding. "What about the tubes, then? How did she know which one you'd put the paper in?"

"Oh, that?" Maomao tore the paper in two, folded the halves, then put a hole through the middle. She stuck a finger through them, then blew between the two pieces of paper, producing a dull whistle. "I'm assuming you know how a flute works."

"You blow into it, and it makes a sound."

"And how do you change that sound?"

"You change how many holes the air comes out of. Even I know that much."

Didn't he get it yet, then? No, maybe not: he hadn't seen the tubes where she'd hidden the paper up close.

"Suppose the tubes acted like the holes of a flute?"

"I'm sorry, but I didn't hear them make any noise."

The theater had been full of sounds of bells and gongs. But there had been another, hidden by those louder noises.

"I got a pretty bad headache standing there. I suspect there was a sound so high-pitched that it couldn't be heard," Maomao said.

Loud noises could hurt the ears. She suspected that even if she didn't consciously detect a sound, it might have subconsciously bothered her.

"A high-pitched noise?"

"Yes," Maomao said, and then blew into her flute. "Did you hear that?"

"Of course I did."

"How about this, then?" She made the noise higher, whistling the same way she had back in the cave with Jinshi. Lahan made a face, and Rikuson looked puzzled for a second. The bodyguard, however, narrowed his eyes.

"I heard that too," Lahan said.

"I...sort of heard it," Rikuson reported.

Then the guard, sounding unsure whether he was allowed to join in the conversation, said, "I didn't hear anything..." Maomao felt a bit bad for him;

he was obviously embarrassed.

"Good," she said. "You're not supposed to—it gets harder to hear as you get older."

The guard was somewhere in his mid-thirties. He was clearly shocked to realize he couldn't hear the sound—his reaction made him look somewhat like Gaoshun. Maybe all middle-aged people acted that way.

"Not everyone can hear sounds to the same pitch," Maomao informed them. There were variations even among people of the same age bracket. The same way some people had better eyesight than others, some had better hearing. What's more, Maomao suspected—although she had no way of proving this—that sometimes people with bad eyes compensated by developing better ears.

"I think that mystic has extremely sensitive hearing," she said. Like how the Lady had reacted to Maomao's whistle from a substantial distance and despite all the intervening noise. Maomao suspected that the White Lady practiced discerning whistling sounds on a regular basis. It made her think of the hunting dog Lihaku had been clowning around with on their excursion. It would also explain why there had been no flutes in the musical ensemble at the White Lady's performance.

Both the vertical and horizontal flutes produced changes in sound by opening and closing a series of holes along the length of the instrument. Suppose the hundred tubes in that box were akin to the holes of a flute. Maomao pushing the paper into one of them would be like closing a hole on an instrument.

"You're suggesting that she could discern a hundred different sounds, and that was how she knew which pipe it was? If that box was like a flute, what served as blowing into it?"

"There's a very simple method."

What if, with the gongs and bells as signals, someone blew into the flute ten times? The box had been covered with a veil, so it would have been no problem for the Lady's assistant to be nearby, operating something that would force air through the pipes. You wouldn't even have to learn a hundred different sounds: ten would suffice.

"As for how they blew into the pipes, the mist explains it."

The mist was steam, which meant they were boiling water somewhere to produce it. What if the desk had been designed so that the vapor would enter

it from below? The audience was so focused on what was on top of the desk that they wouldn't notice any little devices underneath.

"Make sense now?"

"Mm." Lahan and the others nodded.

"There's one last thing," Maomao said, thinking of the silver liquid the Lady had consumed at the end of the show. "That stuff is a very potent poison. I don't know if she actually drank it or not, but it's definitely not something to try at home. You should warn other high officials about it when you get the chance." She gave Lahan her most serious possible look.

Several days later, the White Lady and her show vanished without a trace. In their wake they left only a series of mysterious food poisonings among the merchants of the capital.

What had her objective been? The "female immortal" who looked like the white snake was gone, but the mystery remained.

Long, long ago, those in power had sought an elixir of immortality, and had consumed silver that looked like water, believing it would prolong their lives. Little did they know all it would do was shorten them.

Because of the way it moved, the metal became known as quicksilver. Maomao wondered what had happened to the White Lady after she had drunk the stuff. Had she simply been pretending, or had she really consumed it? If the quicksilver could be expelled from the body still in its liquid state, it wouldn't be too poisonous. But if it was dissolved in steam and inhaled, or else joined with some other substance into a new form, then it was very toxic indeed.

Once upon a time, it had been considered a palliative. The difference between a medicine and a poison was often a matter of application, Maomao reflected, gazing at the vibrant scarlet of a chunk of cinnabar—and resolved to put the entire matter out of her mind.

Chapter 8: Proficiencies

"I'll excuse myself, then."

Maomao didn't say a word as the man who'd delivered the letter to the apothecary shop exited, his job finished. She read the letter, remaining expressionless the entire time, then put it in a letter box.

It was from Jinshi, but it wasn't quite the usual business. Maomao crossed her arms and cocked her head, thinking. *What to do, what to do?* Business from Jinshi always meant trouble, but this one seemed more trouble than most. She could hardly refuse, however, which meant the question was how best to prepare. *How am I going to explain this one to Grams?*

Her ruminations were interrupted by the jabbering of a couple of noisy kids—Chou-u and Zulin, who were carrying baskets full of fresh herbs.

Oh yeah... They said something about wanting to eat kusa-mochi. She watched them idly for a moment, but when she saw them heading for the kitchen, she hurried to grab them by the collar.

"What're you doing?!" Chou-u demanded.

"Let me see those," she said, rifling through his basket and inspecting the plants within. How could he get this so wrong? Maomao glowered at the assembled herbs. "How could you screw up enough to find wolfsbane around here?" She stared at Chou-u, who sat down sullenly. Beside him, Zulin—the younger of the two poor girls who had recently joined them—looked on with worry. She seemed to have embraced her role as Chou-u's henchman.

"I mean, they look really similar."

"Make your mochi with this, and you'll die."

They must have gone out looking for fresh mugwort for their snack, but they'd managed to find a similar-looking but poisonous plant.

Except I didn't think there was any wolfsbane around here.

How had the kids found it when even Maomao didn't know about it? The question wouldn't leave her alone.

"Boo. So we can't make kusa-mochi?" Chou-u and Zulin looked at each other, dejected.

“That’s right. Give it up.”

“I know you picked some mugwort the other day, Freckles. You should share with us.”

“That was for moxibustion.”

Chou-u pouted indignantly at her, and Zulin followed suit. Maomao mercilessly jabbed a finger in each of their mouths and pulled at their lips.

“Yow! That hurt! You suck.”

Zulin, though silent, likewise resisted.

“How do I suck? What was your plan, to give the entire Verdigris House food poisoning? I thought I told you not to go wandering around outside by yourself, anyway.”

“We weren’t by ourselves. Sazen was with us.”

That made Maomao frown even harder—and that was exactly when Sazen showed up, ambling in with a cloth bag in hand.

“Don’t go running off without me, kids! I’m not a young man anymore,” he said—a most inauspicious thing to utter at this particular moment. He knew about Chou-u’s past, and even though Maomao kept trying to get him to stop acting like it, he insisted on treating the boy like a young princeling.

“Sazen! It’s your fault Freckles got angry at me. Try to keep up!”

Without a word, Maomao brought her knuckle crashing down on Chou-u’s head. Zulin looked a little panicked, and Sazen’s mouth opened like he wanted to say something, but Maomao only glared at them both. Then she went and got the mugwort she’d picked for the shop the day before. It was a little dry by now, but it was still recognizable. She held it in one hand and Chou-u’s wolfsbane in the other, and stuck them under Sazen’s nose. It wouldn’t do any good trying to tell the kids about this, but she could at least teach the closest thing to an adult in the room how to tell the difference.

“Do you know what these are?” she asked.

“Sure. Mugwort and wolfsbane, obviously,” Sazen said easily. Maomao looked at him, her mouth open. “I thought I’d surreptitiously switch the wolfsbane for some mugwort, but I never got the chance. Why *are* kids always in such a hurry?” He opened his pouch to reveal some freshly picked mugwort. He also produced another, smaller pouch from inside and handed it to Maomao. She looked at it with curiosity, then opened it to discover some kind of root.

“Is this—?”

“Wolfsbane root. I assume someone brought it down from the mountains and planted it here because they thought it was pretty, but that stuff is dangerous, so I pulled it up. But it would be a shame to let the root go to waste—you can use it for something, right?”

Yes, wolfsbane did have medicinal properties. Expressionless, Maomao grabbed Sazen by the hand.

“Er—?”

Still without a word, she veritably dragged him into the shop and started lining up herbs and medicines from her shelf. Then she said, “What’s this?”

“Huh? Medlar leaves, right?”

“And their effect?”

“They can stop coughs and diarrhea, among other things.”

Maomao pointed to the next herb and repeated the questions. Sazen looked perplexed, but he answered. Chou-u and Zulin watched them from the doorway.

When Maomao had finished interrogating Sazen, she crossed her arms and thought. “So you already know about half the ingredients in here off the top of your head.”

“What I *don’t* know is what brought this on!”

Maomao didn’t respond directly; instead, she took a book off the shelf and handed it to him. *Come to think of it*, she reflected, *didn’t he say that once he got his feet back under him, he meant to go buy back the encyclopedias?*

“Can you read?” she asked him.

“The old man taught me,” he said. *The old man*—presumably meaning the former physician, the one who would never regain his right mind. If Sazen had also learned about all those medicines from “the old man,” it would all make sense. This was the best kind of surprise.

“All right, then learn this book! And you’ll be spending your afternoons here for a while.” Maomao smacked the book she’d given Sazen.

“I’m sorry?”

“I’ll explain everything to the madam and Ukyou.” Sazen still looked confused, but Maomao was feeling magnanimous enough to explain it to him. “You’re not exactly the most gifted bouncer in the world, are you?”

“Er, well... Ahem...”

“I think being an apothecary would fit you much better, don’t you?”

“Well, I...”

Maomao had no intention of retiring, but it had always been her and her father running the place—it wouldn't hurt if there were another pharmacist or two around here. She'd thought she might be able to lard the physically impaired Chou-u with medical knowledge, but the little shit was only interested in playing around and drawing his pictures. No, it would be much faster to work with Sazen here. Not least because as long as Jinshi was in her life, Maomao was likely to be called away from the shop routinely and on short notice. It would be best if there was someone to hold down the fort.

Only question is...

Did Sazen *want* to be an apothecary?

At the moment, he was looking down at the book intently. He flipped a page, his expression serious. At length he said, "I'm only a simple farmer. I went to that fortress because I was completely broke, and I only know how to read at all because the old guy taught me. And medicine? The best I can do is pick whatever I'm told to pick."

Being an apothecary carried a certain amount of prestige; Sazen seemed to be having a crisis of confidence. Too much rejection for too long had started to take a toll on him personally.

In Maomao's eyes, this was a problem. She'd finally found someone with some knowledge, and she was going to put them to use. So she said, "What about it? Some people in this world make their living by reciting nonsensical spells. Or they dance some ridiculous dance in an attempt to cure a cold, when it would be a lot better to keep the patient warm and administer cough medicine and antipyretics. You can make those at least, right?"

"Well, yes... But what if somebody really sick comes to me?"

"If there's nothing you can do, then say so. Those who are going to die will die, whether they take any medicine or not. And if you think the prognosis is too grim, send them somewhere else. You already know more about medicine than some doctors out there."

Like the quack...

To be fair, the physician at the rear palace seemed to have a certain amount of knowledge, as a medical official; he just lacked the ability to apply it. He was very personable, but that wasn't enough.

"Anyway, it's settled," Maomao said.

"What's settled? Aren't you moving a little fast?"

"We have to move fast or we'll run out of time." Maomao, thinking of the

letter she'd received that morning, ignored the still-thunderstruck Sazen, instead turning to the kids. "You two, if you've got time to play around, you've got time to sweep the entrance to the shop. And be sure to learn what's in those books, and learn it well."

This last was directed at Sazen—no sooner had she chased the kids out of the shop than she dropped a pile of books in front of him.

As Maomao had suspected, Sazen turned out to be a fast learner. He picked up simple recipes quickly, and he proved capable of reading the encyclopedia, if slowly and hesitantly. Maomao showed him around the fields near the house as well as those outside the walls, pointing out which medicinal herbs grew where.

Maybe I should teach him which plants are poisonous too.

She wasn't worried—mostly—that it would provoke any strange impulses in him, but she still wasn't going to give him every little detail. If he was that interested, he would pick them up in the course of his study anyway; for now, she restricted herself to the most common ingredients and how to handle them. Sazen frowned when she taught him to produce an abortifacient, but he was sensible enough to understand that it was better than the more *physical* methods of inducing an abortion, like dunking the woman in cold water or simply beating her—both of which occasionally happened to courtesans.

She'd told Chou-u all the same things, but the brat had shown no interest in any of it; it seemed like every time she looked up, he'd run off to play somewhere. His little side business seemed to be filling his pockets, too, to the extent that he was even doing portraits for courtesans from other nearby brothels.

One day, Maomao instructed Sazen to mix up a simple recipe, while she went out to deliver some medicine requested by a courtesan from one of those other establishments. No sooner had she gone outside, though, than she heard a jingling bell. She looked up, wondering what it could be, to find something charging at her: it appeared to be a calico cat running pell-mell.

She might well wonder what the cat was doing there. Calicos were hardly unusual, but this one had a noticeably fine collar, woven of silk and decorated with an imported bell. Not the sort of thing you would see on every feline running around the neighborhood.

"Maomao! Where are you?" called a familiar voice. She soon saw a portly

middle-aged man approaching at something between a walk and run. It was the quack doctor.

Maomao picked up the cat, who'd grown substantially in the time since they'd seen each other last, and held her out to the doctor as he finally shuffled up.

"Y...Young lady, it's been quite a while," he said, smiling even as he struggled to catch his breath.

"Yes, sir, it has. But what in the world is going on?" The cat and the quack should both have been at the rear palace, not here in the pleasure district.

"Yes, a-about that..." The quack couldn't seem to catch his breath, so Maomao led him back to the apothecary shop and made him some tea. She thoughtfully served it cold, and he drank it down in one gulp.

"If I may ask, what are you doing here? Er... On second thought, never mind." Maomao felt bad for him: they must have finally let him go. He was a perfectly decent person, but one could only sit around collecting a salary for so long before questions started to be asked about whether one was doing anything to justify it. It would be tough for him to find new employment as a eunuch, but Maomao resolved to be as cordial to him as possible.

The quack, however, looked at her skeptically and said, "I think you're under some kind of misunderstanding, miss."

"Please, you needn't feel embarrassed about it with me. It happens to everyone at some point."

"No, I'm not certain it does..." The quack stroked his none-too-rich mustache, while Maomao (the cat) yawned on his knees. Apparently he'd continued to serve as her caretaker. Once Consort Gyokuyou had become the Emperor's bride, she had moved to a palace adjoining that of the Empress Dowager, where many a rule and regulation had to be observed—much to the chagrin of the sovereign's little girl, Princess Lingli. It couldn't possibly have hurt to allow her a single pet, could it?

I suppose if it were just the Empress Dowager, she would be fine with it, Maomao thought. But the other palace women living nearby would never have put up with it. And Gyokuyou no doubt had more ladies-in-waiting by now too—even in the rear palace, she'd barely gotten by with her seven women.

Maomao felt a pang of loneliness, but she knew it was the right thing that

she hadn't followed Empress Gyokuyou. Maomao was confident that she could cause more of an uproar than even her feline counterpart, if she might say so herself.

"Ahem, so, the matter at hand," the quack said, having finally gotten his breathing under control. He drank some more tea. "I've been granted permission to return home for the first time in quite a long while, and I was just on my way there..."

"Huh! Finally sending you back, are they?"

"Now you're just teasing me, young lady," the quack said with a touch of exasperation. He was right, and since it was preventing the conversation from progressing, Maomao decided to leave it at that.

"So instead of your home, you're here. Why is that?" she asked.

"Yes, well..." He looked at her with an inscrutable expression. "The permission was granted on a rather unusual condition. You haven't heard anything about it, miss?"

"Exactly what kind of condition?"

"Nothing major. But apparently there's someone who wants to travel with me part of the way. This is a personal request from the Matron of the Serving Women, so I'm sure it's no one...strange."

This apothecary shop, it transpired, was to be the meeting place.

Maomao thought back to the letter she'd received several days before, a unilateral demand from Jinshi that she accompany him on an expedition he would be undertaking. No duration was specified, nor any destination, nor even when they would leave. Maomao was reluctant to close the shop every time they went on one of these little adventures, and she knew the madam wouldn't look favorably on it either, which was why she'd been in such a hurry to teach Sazen the ropes.

I thought maybe I'd have a little longer...

Thankfully, Sazen was a quick student, and she'd readied a supply of medicine beforehand. She was left to wonder, though, why they would be traveling with the quack doctor. She would ask later.

"And as for why Maomao is here, I thought maybe I could ask my family to look after her," the quack said. Considering that he himself was evidently the only alternative, it seemed like a wise choice. He would be lonely, yes, but the kitten had originally stayed at the palace only because of Princess Lingli's caprice. It would probably be hard to justify keeping her in the

medical office much longer. “They’ll be happy to have her catching rats for them.”

“I see,” Maomao said.

The quack seemed jubilant at the idea of seeing his family again for the first time in more than a decade. Maomao recalled that they were producers of paper, supplying even the Imperial court. They certainly would welcome a guard to be on the lookout for any rats that might try to chew on the product. It sounded far away, though, and Maomao (the girl) couldn’t help wondering whether Maomao (the cat) would behave herself on the long journey.

“Oh, look! A cat!” called the courtesans—it was only afternoon, and they still had time before the customers started to arrive. The cat, unfortunately, was startled by the shouting; she gave the quack’s knees a good scratch, then fled the shop.

“Ow! No, Maomao, wait!”

“What a name!” one of the courtesans said, laughing as she watched the cat go.

The animal with the unfortunate moniker ducked through a crack in the door of the shop and made for the entrance to the Verdigris House. Maomao and the quack slipped on their shoes as quickly as possible and went after her.

Maomao (the cat) went weaving among women fresh from early baths (and looking less than made up), ducked between the legs of the menservants preparing the bedchambers, and arrived at the kitchen. She could see four short legs: the kids having a late lunch.

“Where’d you come from?” Chou-u asked as the cat came to a halt in front of him. He chewed on his chopsticks and looked at the calico. Zulin blinked her dewy eyes. Maomao (the cat!) splayed herself over Chou-u’s foot.

“Is this what you’re after?” Chou-u asked, picking up some fish with his chopsticks. It was just grilled blueback, but it had a pleasantly salty taste without the need for any seasoning.

“Mrow!” Maomao batted down Chou-u’s food.

“Hey! Hey, you!”

The fish fell smack on the dirt floor and Maomao gobbled it up. Awfully indelicate table manners for one consuming such a fine feast—rather like a certain someone else.

“No, Maomao, don’t do that!” the quack cried as he arrived, breathing

hard.

"Stupid cat! And who's the geezer?" But that wasn't Chou-u's only question. "Wait... *Maomao*? Seriously?" He grinned openly at Maomao (the girl). Even Zulin seemed to be laughing under her breath, in her own mute way.

Maomao, thoroughly displeased, at least managed to snatch up the calico, although there was no hope of recovering the fish, which the cat kept firmly in her jaws. Chou-u looked ruefully at his meal, but the cat seemed to intrigue him. When he poked her squishy pink toe pads, he exclaimed "Oh!" and his eyes sparkled.

They decided to leave Maomao (the cat) with Chou-u and Zulin, with strict instructions not to let her get away. They alerted one of the menservants, so chances were the kids couldn't get up to *too* much trouble.

When they got back to the shop, Maomao finally had a chance to ask the quack what was really going on. Fiddling uncomfortably with his facial hair, he said, "I believe you know about my family's paper business."

"Yes, sir."

"Ahem, well, the reason I'm going home is actually because there's been a bit of an issue."

Some time ago, he'd received a letter from his younger sister saying that the quality of the paper had suddenly gotten worse. That problem was supposed to have been solved, but maybe something new had come up.

"That's why I asked to be allowed to visit—but apparently someone important had just been hoping they could see my village themselves."

Jinshi had been interested in paper production since his days as a "eunuch," so maybe this struck him as the perfect opportunity to see the process up close. But that still left Maomao wondering what the problem was this time.

"What did her letter say?" she asked.

"I'm not quite sure I can tell you here," the quack said, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "Please, let me explain after we get there."

"Very well," Maomao said, and as if on cue, a horse could be heard neighing outside.

It was a somber young man who appeared, his face classically lovely, but his bangs worn long to hide a burn scar on his right cheek. Maomao

recognized the gloomy visitor.

Not bad, not bad.

It was the customer who'd come to the Verdigris House when all the courtesans had been summoned to entertain. He'd paid no attention to them, just sat there drinking wine. He was one of Jinshi's alter egos. Jinshi had used the fake burn to hide the real scar on his cheek, and his whole appearance was so much less...well, *sparkly* than it normally was that he looked like a different person. Maomao had taught him once how to disguise himself; it seemed he'd put the lesson to good use. If she hadn't seen him in his darker moments as well as a few disguises, she wouldn't have realized it was him.

As for the quack doctor, he didn't seem particularly wary even when confronted with the lovely noble. He didn't recognize him at all.

"Are you ready to go?" Basen spoke in lieu of the disguised Jinshi. His clothing was finer than Jinshi's, and Jinshi behaved like a servant toward him. It seemed to make Basen slightly uncomfortable—although he was likely even more worried about the possibility of being noticed by Maomao's sister Pairin before they could get out of there.

"Am I ready? I daresay it's a little sudden for that," Maomao said. Yes, the letter had arrived several days ago, but there'd been no specific indication of their departure date. Frankly, she hadn't gotten anything ready at all.

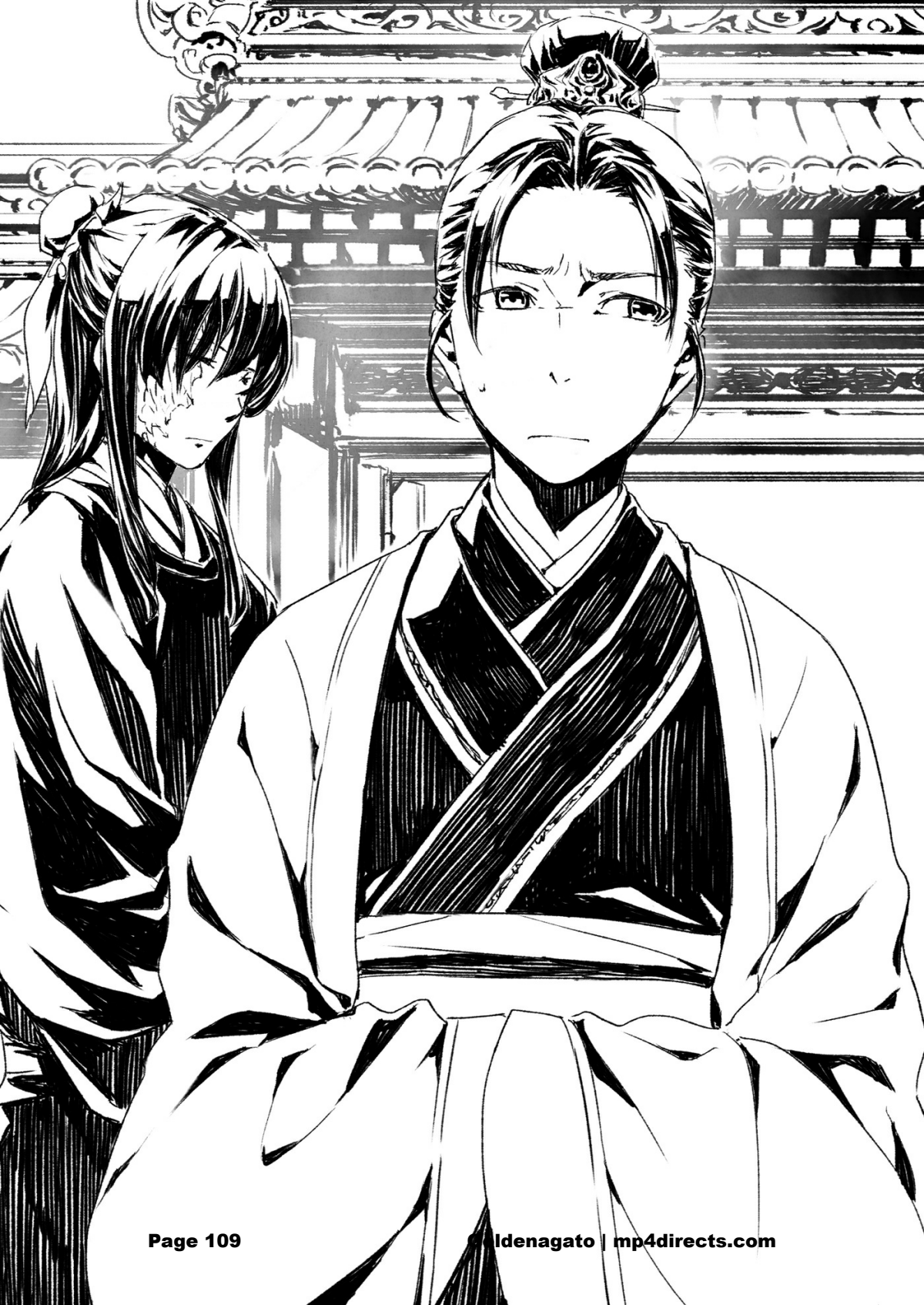
"I'm afraid it was out of our control. There were issues of timing to consider. We've already packed for you."

True, Jinshi's appearance suggested they were going to go spying—and going spying suggested they were going to be at it for a while, so Maomao understood that they must have pushed themselves to be ready for this moment. But to say they'd prepared changes of clothes for a woman—did they understand what that meant?

Whatever. Regardless of what their relationship might actually be—brothers or whatever—the Emperor certainly saw fit to work Jinshi like a dog. There were probably still things to clean up at the rear palace, along with plenty of other professional headaches Jinshi no doubt had to deal with. It *was* his job, so he couldn't exactly complain, but still...

It's like he's grooming a successor, Maomao thought—and then promptly threw the idea away. At the moment it was Consort Gyokuyou's—no, Empress Gyokuyou's son who was the presumptive heir. And what's more, Consort Lihua had also borne a son. The Emperor was only in his mid-

thirties, and still the picture of health. In all likelihood, he would easily remain on the throne until his children came of age. Assuming, of course, that nothing happened to him—but Maomao elected not to contemplate such an unhappy possibility.



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Chapter 9: The Paper Village

After traveling westward two days by carriage, they reached the village that was the quack doctor's hometown. It sat adjacent to some mountains and a forest, downstream of the source of the great river that divided the country in half. Ditches followed the river, but it looked like only weeds were growing in the fields.

Maomao looked at them intently and the quack, who loved to talk, was kind enough to explain. He kept his voice down, perhaps out of deference to Basen, who was sitting diagonally across from them. Jinshi sat beside Basen, but the quack still hadn't figured out who he was.

"That's barley," he said.

"Barley, sir? It seems extraordinarily well irrigated." The ditches ran all around the fields, but Maomao didn't think barley was supposed to need that much water.

Maomao, the cat, was at her feet. She had tired of riding in her basket and alternately lounged on the doctor's knees and peered out the window. She, for one, seemed to know who Jinshi was, and occasionally cuddled up against his ankles. Basen kept his distance from her—maybe he'd never dealt with cats before. There seemed to be a lot of things he didn't cope with very well.

"Those are for the summer rice season. They grow two crops each year here, you see, rice and barley."

"Ahh."

"Stick to wetland rice, and you can grow another crop in the same field without exhausting the soil," the quack added.

Growing two crops in the same year meant taking that many more nutrients from the soil—but the water for rice paddies actually restored nutrients in the ground, protecting against depletion. An ideal form of farming for such a water-rich area.

As they got beyond the fields, the forest came into view, the village nestled nearby it.

"There seems to be a wide range of natural resources around here,"

Maomao remarked. So many, she thought, that there didn't seem to be a compelling reason to focus on making paper; but there were other factors at play.

"When we arrived here, the flatland already belonged to someone else," the quack explained. "But they hadn't given the forest a second look."

That forest, with the water from the nearby mountains running through it, provided the resources for the village's paper industry. There wasn't enough to allow them to produce in bulk, but they had been able to succeed by focusing on quality instead. Happily, the river also served as a convenient way of transporting their product. The two groups made different things, so the villagers got along well with the land's original inhabitants.

"When we got here, the landowner was quite a fine fellow," the quack said.

Something bothered Maomao, however. As they were passing by the fields, her eyes had met those of a farmer stomping on the barley. That was a way of making the grain stronger, yet the way he did it seemed almost angry. The look he had given her was sharp, dark.

Maomao had pretended she hadn't seen him, instead turning back to continue her conversation with the doctor.

When they arrived at the village, they were greeted by a woman who looked to be around forty. The softness of her eyes, and the way they sort of drooped, reminded Maomao of the quack himself. The woman must be the quack's younger sister, she surmised.

The quack passed the cat to the woman, who smiled and stroked its fur. He must have told her ahead of time that he would be bringing the animal. He evidently had not, however, let her know that he would be traveling with an entire entourage, for she looked at Maomao and the others with surprise.

"Ah, Elder Brother, welcome home," she said.

"Yes, thank you, it's good to be back." The quack sounded calm enough, but tears beaded in the corners of his eyes. It was hard to blame him, a man seeing his home again for the first time in more than ten years. "I'd like to go visit the graves," he said. "You know, Father and..."

They must have died while he was at the rear palace. He sniffed audibly.

"Yes, of course. But if you don't mind my asking—" The woman glanced at Maomao and the others. "Are these...friends of yours?" Maomao realized,

as the woman looked at them, that she was seeing a housewife mentally calculating dinner preparations.

"Ah! So this is your superior from your workplace, and your assistant. You could have said so sooner."

So I'm his assistant now. That wasn't exactly true—but it wasn't exactly untrue either. The same could be said of the word *superior*, but as Basen elected not to say anything, he apparently meant to play along.

Auntie Quack (she'd told them her name, but it had been hard to catch and Maomao frankly didn't remember it, so she simply resolved to think of the woman this way) was busily loading the table with food. Steamed freshwater fish with herbs, *baozi* in a steamer basket, and golden-sparkling fried rice all looked delicious. They looked perfect, in fact, considering she'd had to make them on short notice to account for the size of the party. There was even a concoction of fish and congee for the feline Maomao, who ate heartily and without the dignity one normally associated with cats. She would certainly have grabbed the fish off the table if she'd thought she could get away with it.

"I must say, I never expected a eunuch like you to come home with such a lovely young bride."

"Ha ha ha! No such thing, I'm afraid."

"I suppose not!"

The teasing bit of banter was accompanied by the sound of a bowl striking something hard. Maomao looked over to find that Jinshi had dropped his tray.

"Goodness! No worries, I'll get you a new tray right away," Auntie Quack said, refusing to ignore the man with the unsettling burn wound. In Maomao's opinion, if Jinshi was really going to play the part of a servant, he should have stayed with the carriage and eaten field rations or something. Basen probably hadn't allowed it. Jinshi's disguise was perfect—Maomao hoped that they wouldn't give themselves away through some small slip like this.

By the time all the food was on the table, Auntie Quack's family had arrived. There were two younger men and a middle-aged man with a kerchief wrapped around his head. Presumably the middle-aged man was Auntie Quack's husband, and the others were sons.

"Brother-in-law. Long time, no see," the husband said, removing his

kerchief and greeting the quack respectfully.

"Yes, quite a long time," the quack replied, smiling.

One of the sons followed his father in greeting the doctor—but the other ignored the quack entirely, instead sitting down and starting in on the meal with a passion.

"Stop that! How dare you not even say hello!" Auntie said, glaring at the boy.

"Elder Brother..." the other son said, giving the young man an agonized look. So he was the younger, and the man with the nasty attitude was the older brother.

Quack Nephew No. 1 broke open a baozi and took a bite. It was full of pork filling, making Maomao's mouth water.

"You say I should respect my uncle? He's a *eunuch* who hasn't been home in ages. What's he doing here now? And dragging a whole crowd of visitors with him?"

At that, the quack produced one of those eyebrow-drooping, uncomfortable smiles he seemed to specialize in. By now he was used to being ridiculed for being a eunuch, but to suffer such mockery from his own nephew must have been painful. Even Maomao found herself put off by the boy's attitude. Was she going to stand by and let this guy mouth off *and* eat all the good food? She was not! She sat down firmly in her chair.

"If you don't mind, I'll get started before it goes cold," she said, and then expertly snatched the exact piece of food the nephew had been going for. He shot her a nasty look, but she didn't care. She knew plenty of menservants and soldiers much bigger and burlier than this guy. Basen had looked like he wanted to speak up, but appeared to calm down when he saw Maomao handle the situation. Jinshi, for his part, maintained his composure.

Auntie Quack was obviously angry, for when she brought the congee and soup there were portions for everyone except her older son. Her husband and younger son, obviously knowing what was best for them, chose not to comment. The older son, perhaps feeling aggrieved at the way his family was treating him, grabbed another baozi and stalked out of the room.

When the boy was gone, Auntie Quack's husband, scratching his head in embarrassment, bowed to the quack doctor. "I'm very sorry, Brother-in-law. He doesn't know how hard you've worked for this village, how much you've sacrificed. And in front of your superior, no less."

“Oh, it’s quite all right. I’m not bothered. I’m used to things like this,” the quack replied, although he seemed quite conscious of Basen. Maomao jabbed Basen with a fingertip, and he jumped slightly before saying, “We’re the ones who should apologize, showing up so suddenly.”

So he could at least be polite when the situation called for it. That was a relief. He was probably encouraged to mind himself by the relentless stare Jinshi was giving him.

“Good, good, then all’s well,” the quack said, sipping some congee appreciatively.

To him, the claim that he was “used to things like this” was an offhanded remark, but Auntie Quack was clearly troubled by it. It was to save her from being sold into the rear palace that the quack had submitted to becoming a eunuch. And this even though their parents presumably prized a son above a daughter.

“However...I know I didn’t come here just to have dinner. Isn’t there something you’d like to talk about?” the quack said. The rest of the family fell silent. They had reached, it seemed, the real reason he’d come back.

As far as Maomao was concerned, she was simply part of the audience, so she had no intention of stopping eating. The steamed fish was perfectly salted, and the herbs came through beautifully. She would have to ask Auntie what she’d done to it.

The husband set aside his chopsticks and looked at the quack—and then, after a beat, lowered his head. “Brother-in-law, we hear you’ve become a renowned physician, so famous that you even delivered the Emperor’s own child. You must have His Majesty’s ear—and we beg you ask a personal favor of him.”

“Huh?!”

Delivered the Emperor’s child, did he? Maomao thought. It had, in point of fact, been her adoptive father Luomen who had performed the delivery—but knowing the quack, he might have embellished the story in one of his letters. Even Maomao, though, had enough decency in her to keep quiet at this moment. Basen frowned a little, and Jinshi appeared to be looking at some point in the distance.

The quack, for his part, set down his own chopsticks, his eyebrows drooping even further than usual. “To ask His Majesty to listen to me would be far beyond my station.”

“Even though you attended the delivery of the royal consort?”

It was impossible. Even the highest officials were only sometimes allowed to speak with the Emperor; even to *seek* a personal audience with him might be considered an act of disrespect and cost the quack his head. Maomao herself had been graced with the opportunity to speak to the Emperor on several occasions, but each time it was because His Majesty had personally permitted it. And now Gyokuyou was no longer just a consort, but the Empress. Getting in touch with her would be difficult.

At this rate, the quack looked likely to find the task foisted upon him regardless—and if Basen decided to break in with some awkward rejoinder, it wouldn’t help matters. So Maomao decided to take over the conversation. “A previous physician of the rear palace involved himself in business that wasn’t his responsibility, and he found himself punished with mutilation and then banished from the palace,” she said.

The others looked startled.

“Rumor has it he was foolish enough to learn something he didn’t need to know—they say that’s why he got in trouble.”

She was talking about her own father, true enough, but she wasn’t really *lying*. She wondered briefly whether it was safe for her to say as much as she had, but there was no reaction from Basen or Jinshi, and she was glad she hadn’t inspired any shenanigans on their part.

Auntie Quack and her family swallowed hard and looked at each other uneasily. Their shoulders slumped.

The quack, however, leaned forward, waving a hand. “It’s true I probably can’t speak to His Majesty, but there are other people I might be able to reach out to. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

Auntie Quack and her husband shared a glance. Maomao wondered if maybe she was imposing, but she’d come this far—she wanted to hear the rest. Jinshi and Basen, evidently of the same mind, showed no sign of moving.

“Please, speak. I can’t promise how much help we might be able to offer, but we can at least hear you out.” This urging came from Basen. The words more properly belonged to Jinshi, but here Basen was speaking on his behalf.

The quack looked at them, nodded, and then said, “You can trust these people.” It was that rare moment when he said the right thing at the right time.

“Well... If you say so,” Auntie Quack said slowly, and then she began to speak. “The problem has to do with land rights in the village.”

The land on which the village was built, she said, was actually rented. The owner, who had lived nearby, hadn’t been using it, so he had been willing to rent it to them cheaply—but as the years went on, the two sides began to talk about selling the land outright. The landlord at the time had been an easygoing man who got along well with the villagers, or so Auntie said.

Some years ago, however, that man had died, and his son had taken over as landlord—whereupon things began to change. Unlike his father, the new landlord despised outsiders and had an ugly habit of looking down on craftspeople. When the village received an Imperial commission to supply paper to the court, he could barely stand it.

Back when the quality of the village’s paper had dipped, the new landlord had come several times demanding repayment of the debt. According to the contract with the previous landlord, the land and forest were lent to the villagers for twenty years. The amount of payment was clearly stipulated, and the village always paid on time.

“But he kept insisting that the rice harvest was down because we were polluting the water. Kept saying they didn’t have enough water to make rice,” said Son No. 2, an agonized look on his face. “Recently it’s gotten even worse. He’s told us to pay immediately or else to get off his land.”

There were another five years left on the contract. The village could hardly come up with five years’ worth of money all at once, and on such short notice. But they were dealing with their landlord. Much like Maomao couldn’t boss the old madam around, the village had to tread carefully.

“If we have to leave, our houses and most of what’s in them would have to stay here. And who knows how long it might take us to find a new place to live?”

“We think they simply want to drive us out of the village so that they can move in and start making paper themselves.”

“Why in the world would they do that? They know how to make rice and we know how to make paper, and we should stick to our businesses,” the quack said, his thin mustache waving gently. Maomao the cat, done with her meal and with nothing to do, saw it and crouched, preparing to spring on the facial hair.

“You might think so,” Auntie said, shaking her head. “But the tax on

grain suddenly shot up this year."

"While the tax on our paper went *down* a couple of years ago. You'd better believe that hasn't improved relations."

Ah, so that's it.

The relaxed tax on paper was clearly because of the desire to make paper more universal and ultimately improve literacy. As for the increased rice tax, the thinking had probably been that it wouldn't be too much of an imposition on an area that produced two crops a year, and meanwhile it would shore up reserves for what was coming.

Maomao stole a glance at Jinshi. He looked calm enough, but she could see him fidgeting a little.

This must be about dealing with insect damage, she thought. Sending crops from abundant regions to the hardest-hit places would mean fewer people starved. She knew it was simply Jinshi and the entire government trying to do what they could, and she didn't think they were wrong to do it—but the people who found their taxes raised were understandably unhappy. They must have felt they had to make up the difference in other ways. By putting the screws to this village, for example.

As the quack suggested, however, it wasn't as if one could simply move into the village and start making paper. There were certain things one had to know; how to do it right wasn't obvious without experience.

"Thing is, we have another problem too—*him*," said the husband, evidently referring to the young man with the bad attitude. "For certain reasons, he's more on the side of the farmers here."

"My brother, he..." The younger brother smiled uncomfortably. "How do I put this? He's been blinded." He sounded like he could barely bring himself to say the words.

"I'm embarrassed to admit it, but the boy doesn't know much. He thinks all officials are the same." So that was why he had lashed out at the quack—he must have thought of eunuchs as indistinguishable from the bureaucrats who had raised the taxes. "This is why we need your help."

The request was this: get them to lower the taxes.

Not happening, Maomao thought. It was impossible, even though Jinshi was sitting right there. If an order given in the morning was rescinded in the afternoon, it would throw the country into chaos. It might have been one thing if these people had been on the edge of starvation, but from what she

could see, it just didn't look like things were that bad.

This put the quack doctor in a very awkward position as well. There was, truly, nothing he could do to help. The cat sat on his knees, batting at his quavering mustache, leaving scratch marks on his chin.

"I'm afraid I'm just a eunuch, you see..." he said.

The family's shoulders slumped at that. The husband rallied himself from his disappointment, though, and said, "There's to be a conference tomorrow. Perhaps you could at least accompany us?"

"Yes, that much I could do..." He glanced at Maomao. She passed the look along to Basen.

"Might I be able to attend as well?" Basen asked. He affected nonchalance, but he could hardly help being interested; he was, in his own way, directly involved in the matter. "I'd like to be present as a third party," he explained.

"Well..." the husband started, but he didn't say more than that. Most likely, he was perfectly happy to have Basen along, but suspected the landlord would object.

"I'll simply stand in the back and keep out of things. I'll only speak up if the other party gets too aggressive," Basen said. Then the husband nodded, still reluctant.

"And I'll be there, of course," the quack said.

Not that he'll be any help, Maomao thought. She did wonder, though, if she herself might be allowed to be present. She grabbed the other Maomao off the quack's knees just as the cat was delivering a fresh scratch.

Auntie Quack's husband was the village headman, and the family's house had space enough to put up some visitors for the night. Maomao's group had been planning to stay at a roadside inn, but they ended up staying right where they were. Maomao was given a single small room, while the quack was put in the master bedroom, with Jinshi and Basen in a large guest room. The bodyguards with them were housed in an annex. There were more than enough beds and sleeping mats; day laborers would be hired when taxes were due, and there were plenty of furnishings on hand.

Auntie Quack offered to prepare the bath for them—they were guests, after all—but Basen declined, saying they had already put her to more than enough trouble. Frankly, Maomao would have liked to wash up, but she

couldn't contradict Basen, who must have been acting on quiet instructions from Jinshi.

Instead, Maomao asked for a bucket to be brought to her room, and she wiped herself down with a hand towel. She just took the sweat off—the water was too cold to want to do much more—but she did decide to wash her hair, which was starting to get oily. For that purpose, she put hot water in the bucket, but just a cup's worth. She let down her hair, and then when it was good and wet she added some soap. She rubbed her scalp gently, methodically, working out the grime.

She rinsed away the suds and wrapped her sopping hair in a towel to dry. Her feet were cold, so she dipped them in the water, which was still warm. While she was assiduously wiping her hair, there was a knock at her door.

"Come in," she said, but there was no response from outside. Puzzled, she opened the door a crack and looked out. She was greeted by the sight of an unsettling man with a burn standing there.

She didn't say anything, just opened the door, and the unsettling man—that is, Jinshi—came in. The window of her room was closed—she'd been washing, after all—and the next room over belonged to Jinshi and Basen. The next room past that was some distance away.

"You can talk. I don't think anyone's going to hear us," she said.

"Did I interrupt you washing?" he asked. His voice had its characteristic heavenliness. Evidently he hadn't decided to try to alter it this time, which would explain why he'd been staying silent.

"Just my hair. I'm sorry for not being more presentable," Maomao said, continuing to pat her head as she moved the bucket to a corner of the room. It was a cramped space, and the bed was about the only place to sit down, so Maomao remained standing, looking at Jinshi.

"You should sit down," he said.

"My hair's still wet," she replied, giving him a look that she hoped meant, *Why are you here, anyway?*

Jinshi, touching the burn on his cheek, showed her a cloth-wrapped package. "I'd like to get rid of this thing for a while. Do you think you could replicate the makeup?"

The package contained red dye, glue, and a white powder. The glue used carefully crushed rice and was on the tacky side. On inspection, she could see Jinshi's scar was starting to thin out; one sweated even when it was cold, and

when he lay down to sleep it would start to rub off.

"Probably. I think I can do it," she said. She could use dyed glue to pucker the skin, then layer the white powder on top of it to get more or less the right effect. Adding some shadows to make his face look sallow would complete the illusion.

"If you would, then. Remove it for now." He dipped a kerchief into the bucket.

Oh...

"What is it?"

"Let me prepare fresh water."

"No, that would be too much trouble. This is fine."

Maomao didn't say anything more, but stared at the bucket. It didn't *look* too filthy, but...

"Is something the matter?" Jinshi asked.

"No, sir, nothing."

She'd dipped her feet in the bucket after washing her hair, but she could keep that to herself. Jinshi didn't seem bothered by the used water, so she decided there was no need to trouble herself getting more.

She took the damp kerchief and rubbed at his face. It was a nice, new cotton handkerchief, but it swiftly grew grungy with dye and glue. It was a waste, Maomao felt; the cloth was unlikely to come clean of the red color even with diligent washing. She wished he'd had a less pristine rag on hand to use for this.

Jinshi closed his eyes and let her work, seemingly enjoying the feel of the warm, damp cloth. He looked so thoroughly unguarded, she worried he might find his head chopped clean off, the assassin laughing all the while.

Athlete's foot can't spread to the face, can it?

Not that Maomao had athlete's foot, to be clear.

The glue dissolved, revealing Jinshi's bare skin, which was smooth and healthy—although it had another wound, a real one, that was still visible, slashing across it. There was still some redness around the scar; it would likely fade with time, to an extent. But it would never go away completely; it would be with him the rest of his life.

"Master Jinshi?"

"Yes?"

"Why *are* we stopping by the master physician's house?"

And with Maomao in tow, no less.

"It's on the way to our destination. I thought we might as well have a look, as long as we were going to be passing through anyway."

"On the way to our destination?" To her, that meant: going home was going to take even more time than coming out. *Where in the world are we headed?*

"Honestly, it's convenient timing. It gives me a chance to see the reaction to the increased taxes firsthand."

"That much is true."

Each year when taxes were collected, the quantity of the harvest was considered compared to the local population, and the ratio checked to ensure that no one was facing an undue burden. But those were ultimately just numbers; they could only be trusted so far.

"Besides, there's something strange going on around here."

"What's that, sir?"

"I'm afraid I don't quite know. I only know that your cousin brought that abacus of his to bear, and he thinks something is off."

Lahan's fixation on numbers was legendary. He was a card-carrying eccentric who worked day and night seeking ever more beautiful numbers, even if he couldn't make them quite perfect. If he had brought the matter to Jinshi, there was almost certainly something going on.

"He claims there's an aberration in the amount of rice they've shipped these past few years." Eccentric Lahan might be, but he wasn't apt to be mistaken on a point like that. "That's what brought me here—but look what else we found. We can't have professional paper producers replaced with a bunch of know-nothing amateurs just as we're trying to ramp up production."

So this was more than just a sightseeing diversion; he was doing real work. Now she felt especially bad as he washed his face with her foot-water.

Jinshi must have been getting sleepy, for he gradually slumped on the bed until he was lying down. Thinking what a lot of trouble he could be, Maomao sat on the bed and began gently stroking his hair. He wasn't wearing perfume, yet a faintly floral scent still wafted from him. Just how much like one of those celestial maidens was he, anyway?

"Shall I redo your burn now? Or would you rather wait until morning?"

"Now, please." His drowsy voice was more alluring than normal. Reflecting that she could cause a veritable disaster if she were to kick him out

of her room right now, Maomao stirred the glue and dye with her finger. She added some water to give it the right consistency, then began to daub it around his scar.

I wonder who thought of this. It looked awfully convincing. It might not stand up to getting wet, but they were in the dry season, when it very rarely rained.

"Couldn't Master Basen do this?"

"He doesn't quite have the talent."

"So this is why you brought me along?"

"It's not the only reason."

Jinshi seemed to like physical contact. He closed his eyes like a child as she spread the glue around with the tips of her fingers.

"Don't fall asleep," she warned him. "I'll call Master Basen first."

"How helpful do you think he'd be if you did?"

Not very, admittedly. Unlike his father Gaoshun, Basen didn't have the knack yet. Frankly, she felt he lacked a certain forcefulness as Jinshi's assistant.

"Why *is* he your assistant, anyway?" she asked before she could stop herself. Part of the problem was that she hadn't seen Gaoshun for quite a while, and she missed the restorative effect he had on her. She missed the middle-aged man's occasional mischievous streak.

Jinshi slowly opened his eyes a little wider; the dark pupils showed a shade of surprise. "Hmm. I know how he can seem, but he's...well, perfectly competent when it matters."

"If you'll forgive my saying so, sir, you don't sound very convinced."

Maybe Jinshi was a little soft on Basen; they were milk brothers, after all. Then again, if Basen was genuinely comfortable around Jinshi, that was a sort of talent in itself.

Maomao finished the burn makeup, and was about to wash her goopy hand when she had a thought. With her clean hand, she reached for her luggage and pulled out the bronze sheet she used as a mirror. Then she tried painting the stuff around her mouth. She grinned, looking like a monster.

"That is positively awful," Jinshi laughed. Maomao, figuring she could simply wash the goop off again, was seized by the desire to paint it around her eyes and cheeks as well. Now a truly disturbing face floated on the bronze plate, almost corpse-like.

Jinshi, completely sucked into the spectacle, was trying desperately not to laugh. She felt bad for him—he was practically in pain—but she leaned over to finish the job.

Just then, there was a knock on the door and Basen called out, "I'm coming in." The door opened before they could stop him. His widened eyes were greeted by the sight of Jinshi, apparently doubled over with pain, and Maomao leaning toward him, her face and hand covered in something red.

He didn't say anything.

They didn't say anything.

Shortly thereafter, Basen *couldn't* say anything. Just as he was about to shout for someone, Maomao crammed the handkerchief into his open mouth, while Jinshi pinned him down. It was the most coordinated thing they'd done since the day they'd met.

Come the next day, Maomao was in attendance at the discussion with the others. They were at a restaurant in the village where the landlord lived, not far from the papermakers' own village. It probably wouldn't have taken an hour to walk between the two.

The dreary eatery was nonetheless fairly large. The place doubled as an inn; it probably normally catered to travelers on the highway, not locals. In fact, perhaps Maomao would have found herself staying here last night had they not ended up lodging at the quack's home.

Present were the quack's brother-in-law and his two sons, along with three middle-aged men from their village. Throw in Maomao, Basen, and Jinshi, and you had a party of ten in total. Maomao had her doubts about whether Basen could properly protect Jinshi if things turned ugly, but then again, Jinshi seemed pretty capable of protecting himself. It would probably be all right.

Across from them were no fewer than fifteen well-built guys, one of whom was a middle-aged man who sat imperiously in the middle of the group, stroking his facial hair.

The old man and woman who ran the establishment were watching them with undisguised annoyance. They'd probably picked the place on the understanding that things might get violent, and it was a choice that couldn't have pleased the owners.

The quack was visibly shaking. Other than the restaurant owner's wife,

Maomao was the only woman around, and he seemed worried about it. No one else, though, seemed to take any interest in the scrawny chicken-girl in their midst; if anything, a few of them seemed to be chuckling amongst themselves and puzzling about why she was even there.

It had, in fact, not been easy for Maomao to come. Auntie Quack had tried to stop her, pointing out that though she might not look like much, she was still an unmarried young woman, and it would be awful if some terrible fate awaited her at this restaurant. More than anything, though, she said Maomao simply didn't belong at this meeting.

Be all that as it may, Maomao had the quack looking piteously at her; and besides, she was curious about this alleged contract. "I have some acquaintances who are knowledgeable about these kinds of things," she ended up saying. "Couldn't I let them know what I've seen?" She was, in a way, stretching the truth, but it would have to do.

When she put it that way, Auntie, seemingly imagining that Maomao knew some kind of legal officials, reluctantly agreed. Maomao was actually referring to Jinshi and Basen, who happened to already be with them, but there was no reason to mention that.

And so Maomao found herself sitting in a seat a short distance from the main group. The woman of the establishment brought her tea, but the place smelled of alcohol—maybe there was a tavern here too—and Maomao only barely managed to keep herself from ordering some. Jinshi and Basen were seated at the table with her.

"Was it really necessary for you to be here?" Basen asked, rehashing the subject of what had already been a rather protracted argument between Auntie and the quack. If he objected, he should have said so then.

"The master physician requested my presence; it would have been inhumane of me to abandon him."

"Listen to you talk..." Basen sounded like he wanted to press the issue, but the quack had been stealing glances at Maomao ever since they'd gotten here, and so he dropped the subject. Instead he looked around and remarked, "I have to say, there's an awful lot of alcohol here for a place this size."

The shelves were packed with wines, but the main offering seemed to be an unrefined or "cloudy" wine that was stored in a large barrel in the kitchen; a murky, whitish alcohol. In the capital, "clear" or distilled spirits were the

drink of choice; this stuff looked like classic "countryside wine." Presumably travelers were offered the stuff off the shelves, while the locals were served out of the barrel.

While Maomao had been distracted by the drinks, the discussions had begun.

"Did you bring the money?" asked—naturally—the imperious middle-aged man, sounding like a third-rate villain in a stage play. Maomao wasn't sure if the rough-looking men around him were tenant farmers or hired muscle. Brother-in-law and his sons and friends were well-built, but clearly outnumbered. She looked around, thinking about where she would run if things turned violent.

"There was still supposed to be time. Can't you reconsider?" the quack's brother-in-law asked meekly. Between him and the landlord sat a piece of paper, presumably the contract.

"What's there to think about? I'm not just lending you that land out of the goodness of my heart, you know. If you can't pay, then I want you out." He was giving no quarter. It sounded like this wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation. The man went on: "Look, I like to think we're being flexible. We offered to wait until next year. We just asked you to teach us a thing or two in the meantime."

Ridiculous, Maomao thought. So the craftspeople could either leave immediately, or next year—and if they chose to wait, it would only mean giving the other villagers time to learn the papermaking techniques. They obviously had nowhere to go now, but if they waited, they would be forced to give up their trade secrets. The farmers probably hoped to take the Imperial commission too, slotting neatly into the craftspeople's former lives. It was enough to make a person angry—but it wouldn't normally have gone unchecked. The proof was right there on the table.

Something was odd, though. Why make the papermasters teach a bunch of farmers how to make paper and then force the craftsmen out? Why not use the debt as leverage to force them to work for the farming village? Did they really hate outsiders that much? Maomao watched the middle-aged man, who was looking scornfully at the people from the papermaking village. The sons in particular seemed to be the objects of his wrathful look.

Maomao trotted over and stood behind the husband. The quack was beside them, his mustache quivering.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Basen hissed, but Maomao roundly ignored him.

The contract had been written more than ten years ago, but the paper still appeared in excellent shape. Had it been of lower quality, it would have grown ragged over so much time. The contract did indeed stipulate monthly payments in a specified amount over the course of twenty years, and at the end of it there appeared the *huaya* of the individuals concerned—so-called “flower marks” that served in lieu of signatures, showing that the document was valid and proper. With everything so obviously in order, Maomao couldn’t fathom why the landlord would be pressing them this way.

The younger son—a perceptive and thoughtful man—quietly filled her in. “He claims the contract’s invalid,” he said—even though it had been written by a scribe and everything.

“Even though it has flower marks on it?”

“Yes. They’re real marks, but... Well, the last landlord, he couldn’t read.”

“He was illiterate?” Maomao asked. That was hardly unusual, but it was puzzling. Landlords often had to review paperwork like this, and were usually educated for the task.

“He was a son-in-law.”

Ah.

Now it made sense. If he’d been adopted into the family to take things over, all the pieces would fit. He’d probably been the son of an industrious tenant farmer—he wouldn’t have had time to study, and his hours would only have become more precious after he got married, even if it had occurred to him to try to learn.

“He never used to go to a scribe; his wife handled those things for him.” But this contract, evidently, had been concluded after the wife’s death.

Hmmm. Maomao wanted to believe that it was indeed a real contract. The younger son claimed the flower marks were legitimate, which implied the contract had been concluded in the presence of the previous landowner.

“Is the scribe still around? Or the witness?”

“They’ve both passed, I’m afraid.” The contract had been signed fifteen years ago, and neither had been young men even then.

This just keeps getting worse, Maomao thought. While she had been getting up to speed, the landlord had continued pressing the impossible choice on the quack’s brother-in-law. The other farmers were grinning

nastily, and the craftspeople seemed to shrink. The brother-in-law's older son, though, was biting his lip, a conflicted expression on his face.

"If you don't think you can get out right away, I guess that only leaves one choice. We'll send a couple of the youngsters over tomorrow. They can help you, and you can teach them the job. You'd *better* teach them. By next year."

The craftspeople's fists were shaking. The quack had come along, but he was never going to be of any help; he was as impotent as the rest of them. Only Maomao looked around, substantially less concerned than the others. She really *was* curious about that wine. She'd have to order some later—but even she knew better than to do it right now, in the middle of all this.

The papermakers looked like they were at a funeral. The landlord, however, obviously feeling festive, began ordering drinks. "A round for me and all my boys," he said, his generosity eliciting a cheer from the farmers. The mistress of the establishment grudgingly brought trays full of wine cups for the drinkers.

Maomao sniffed. *Huh?* She looked at the wine the farmers were drinking. It wasn't the cloudy stuff—it was clear spirits. The landlord himself was drinking something else again, an amber-colored liquid that was obviously some kind of distilled alcohol. The stuff had come from one of the shelves. Evidently he could hold his liquor.

The landlord, she could understand; of course he would drink whatever was his favorite. But to order distilled liquor even for the tenant farmers—that was extremely generous. And this when there was more than enough of the only slightly less distinguished cloudy wine right here.

Maomao thought about it for a moment, then—although she felt bad for the woman who was carting the drinks around, obviously annoyed—she raised her hand and called the mistress over.

"What is it?"

"I'd like a cup as well, please. Of the wine."

The woman all but shrugged and gave her a drink.

"Young lady, of all the times..." The quack looked downright exasperated with her, as did his brother-in-law. As, needless to say, did Basen—but Jinshi motioned for her to order more.

Ah. So he's caught on? Maomao ordered cups for Jinshi and Basen. Then she drained her drink. It had a sweet flavor and good body. It wasn't as

refined as the stuff available in the capital, but it wasn't bad. For all the mellowness of the flavor, though, it had a distinct alcoholic sting.

If it had tasted bad, that would be explanation enough. But instead... Maomao licked her lips. So they had an eating establishment that was forced to accommodate unruly customers, and a whole barrel of cloudy wine. Yet that wasn't what they served to the unruly landlord and the farmers. *Huh. So that's the story*, Maomao thought. She turned to the quack's brother-in-law, who still looked exasperated. "Pardon me, but is there a distillery around here?"

"No, nothing of the sort, as far as I know..."

"I figured as much." Maomao's lips twisted into a smirk, and she went and stood, cup in hand, before the chattering, merrymaking landlord and his buddies. Maomao put the cup on the table with an audible *tok* and gave them a smile that looked like nothing so much as a wild animal.

"What do you want, little girl? Gonna pour us a drink?" The landlord gave her a mocking grin, then burst out laughing.

"Y-Young lady!" The quack practically clung to her, trying to understand what she was doing. Basen nearly stood up himself, but at a discreet tug on his sleeve from Jinshi, he sat back down.

Maomao chuckled and said to the landlord, "How about a drinking contest, my good sir?" She smacked her chest demonstratively.

"A drinking contest! Hah! You've got some nerve, I'll give you that!" the landlord said, amused by the saucy young woman who'd appeared before him. The farmers all laughed uproariously, the papermakers looked despondent, and the quack doctor was practically beside himself. Only Jinshi and Basen, both accustomed to Maomao's typical behavior, appeared unmoved.

"You can't be serious!" the quack's brother-in-law said. He and his sons looked deeply worried.

"It'll be all right. But I have a question: how much is left on your debt?"

After a second the man replied, "It's a thousand silver pieces a year, and we've already paid half this year's amount, so that would make it 4,500."

Hmm. That was, indeed, not an amount that just anyone would be willing to lend. Imperial commission or no, the village wasn't suited to large-scale production, and wouldn't exactly be raking in the cash.

All she said, however, was "I see." She seated herself assertively across

from the landowner. “Since we’re doing this, how about a bet?”

“A bet! Attagirl!” Now the landlord, obviously confident in his drinking abilities, was simply making fun of her. “So, do you *have* anything to wager?”

“Yes—you’ve already seen it.” Maomao smacked herself in the chest again. “If you sell me to a procurer, I’ll bring at least three hundred silver.”

Several of the farmers spat out their drinks, while the craftspeople were speechless. There was a clatter that turned out to be Jinshi jumping out of his chair. Maomao, though, simply nodded as if to indicate her calm confidence.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Three hundred! That’s a big number for such a little girl. Do you have any idea how the market works, kid?”

Well, yes; that was why she’d said it. She felt she’d seen her fair share of young ladies being sold off.

“The most perfect jewel in the world don’t sell for more than a hundred, and you think *you*—” The landlord was laughing so hard, spittle flew from his mouth; he was enjoying himself to the hilt now. His friends, likewise, were good and drunk—perfect.

Maomao looked at them and then laughed. “Pff!” She made sure they knew that it was a mocking sound. The drunken men picked up on it, as she had hoped, and a good half of them began to glare at her.

“You only think that because a daikon fresh out of the dirt will *never* go for more than fifty silver,” Maomao declared. “To think, you don’t even realize that!”

She felt her body jerk as someone grabbed her by the collar, pulling her up until she was standing on her tiptoes. Ah: her rather unflattering comparison of country girls to root vegetables hadn’t gone unnoticed. Jinshi was about to make a move, but she shot him a look out of the corner of her eye. If he involved himself now, it would only make things more complicated.

“Just you say that again!” howled a farmer—call him Farmer No. 1—red in the face and coming for her with his fists raised. His clenched hands were blackened with the dirt of the fields, and she could see that if he hit her, it was not going to be pleasant.

But I may have to live with it, she thought. She’d come this far; she couldn’t back down now.

The quack had collapsed, while his fellow villagers watched with looks of

horror.

"You can't even read or write," Maomao continued. "Heh! You'll never even *use* paper—let alone do a decent job of making it, even if they did teach you."

The fist launched at her—but it never hit her. Instead there was a *thwack* of something striking the table. Someone had interposed himself between Maomao and the aggrieved farmer. A substantial purse was on the table now—and Jinshi was standing between the two of them.

He turned the purse over, and a veritable hail of silver poured out, jangling noisily. Everyone in the room looked at it with eyes wide and mouth agape, including Basen, whose mouth was opening and closing uselessly, aghast. What, he seemed to wonder, was Jinshi doing?

"Three hundred silver would be cheap at the price for this girl," Jinshi said. He had pitched his voice lower than usual, and he used his handsome but unsettling looks to keep the room in check. He almost casually brushed away the hand of the man holding Maomao.

Don't go flashing your silver like that! Maomao thought, but she had no choice but to roll with it. She straightened her collar, planted a foot on the chair, and stuck out her chest (such as it was). "You see? Men who know value know what they're looking at when they're looking at me."

The farmer who'd been about to hit her growled and gave her a baleful glare instead. Maomao and Jinshi both gave the farmers their most galling smirks.

"We don't have to put up with this, boys! Let's teach 'em to mind their manners!" one of the other farmers exclaimed—but the landlord held up a hand. "Don't get ahead of yourselves," he said, and the other farmers flinched and shrank back. "You've put real money on the table. As far as I'm concerned, you've got yourself a bet."

So he was on board. Maomao smiled—an expression that might have looked out of place at that particular moment—and removed her foot from the chair. "Very good. Who's first, then?"

The people from the papermaking village stared at Maomao like they couldn't believe what was happening. The man and wife who ran the establishment appeared anxious at best. The quack doctor was still flat on the floor. Jinshi, meanwhile, was giving Maomao a look that communicated that he was *very* upset about this; Basen looked upset that Jinshi was upset. The

bag full of coins sat on the table.

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“Let me be the first to take her on!” cried the man who had almost hit Maomao.

Perfect.

Empty wine bottles littered the floor, along with three large men—the fourth was just now joining them.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said the quack’s nephew, who was tending to his incapacitated uncle.

“My, my, done already?” Maomao asked, draining what was left in her cup. It was a distilled liquor that burned as it went down. Much better than anything you’d normally expect to find at a rustic establishment like this one—but still hardly more inebriating than water for Maomao, who was used to drinking much stronger stuff.

It was their mistake, thinking they could dispense with her quickly by challenging her with the highly alcoholic distilled spirits. The men themselves weren’t accustomed to drinking such potent stuff, and it saw them each under the table quickly. (They were thoroughly soused, but nobody was going to die.) Maomao had no intention of taking it easy on them.

“Three hundred? Not a bad bargain,” Jinshi said at her ear. Imagining that he might try to “buy” her again only strengthened her resolve not to lose this contest. It might be worth pointing out for the record that a procurer prepared to drive a hard bargain might get a village girl for just twenty silver. Jinshi truly had a skewed sense of value.

In any event, with Jinshi by her side she had outdrunk the first farmer. The second had made the mistake of assuming Maomao would be nearly drunk by then, and had challenged her with rich alcohol—which put him out after a single cup. The third and fourth men went down in similar fashion. It was true that she was, in principle, at a disadvantage because she was taking on a succession of opponents; but unfortunately for them, Maomao exceeded all their expectations.

That makes four, she thought. Three hundred for one, six hundred after the second man, and 1,200 after the third. With four down, her take was now 2,400 silver. The remaining farmers were glowering at her, red-faced. They couldn’t read, but maybe they could do a little math. There were several of them left, but if Maomao could beat out just one more of them, her problems would be over. The papermakers’ debt was supposed to be 4,500 silver.

She was glad the other parties had been drunk. She'd gotten them to sign a simple contract without thinking too hard about it. Four contracts, in fact. The farmers probably thought they were just scraps of paper—she could tell because even the esteemed landlord himself had been about to use them for wastepaper.

Speaking of the landlord, he was growling and frowning, and finally he sat down across from her. "Care for a match?" The mustachioed man was smiling, but his eyes were hard.

Maomao patted her belly. *Hope I can swing another one.* Even she was starting to feel the effects after drinking four people into unconsciousness. The landlord appeared to know how to hold his liquor, as befitted someone who normally drank distilled spirits. He smirked at Maomao's evident discomfort, then glanced at the contract. "If you think I'm gonna be another lightweight, think again." Then he scrawled a signature on the contract and slammed it on the table. "Hey, brother, you won't try to stiff me on my money, will you?" he said. Jinshi stood silently with his arms crossed.

"No one's going to be stiffing anyone," Maomao said. Then, feeling it was her only option, she produced a small bottle from the folds of her robe.

The landlord's entourage immediately set up a ruckus. "Hey! What the hell is that?"

"I'm just a little tired of the taste of this wine. I thought I'd freshen it up a little," Maomao said, and tapped some of the contents of the bottle into the amber liquid in her cup.

The landlord leaned toward her. "Well, now, hold on. Not going to share?"

Well, if he insisted... Maomao passed the bottle to the landlord, who looked at it critically, then emptied the remaining contents into his own cup. "Let me guess... A little something to help you hold your liquor?" He grinned at her.

Maomao, expressionless, brought the cup to her lips and drank. The landlord watched her drain it and then, when he saw she was unaffected, he smirked again and drank his own cup dry. *Glug, glug, glug...*

Crash. The landlord fell over. One of the farmers rushed to him and helped him sit up, but the middle-aged man was obviously in something of a stupor.

"Hey, you! What'd you do to him?"

“I didn’t do anything. I put the same stuff in my own drink; you all saw me.” The landlord had ended up flat on his back for one reason and one reason only: he was dead-drunk. “I believe this means I win the bet.”

There was a collective silence, during which Maomao stood up and took the contracts her drinking opponents had signed. She went over to the quack’s brother-in-law without so much as a stumble in her step and gave them to him. Finally, she turned to the proprietress of the establishment. “Excuse me. Where is the bathroom?”

“Out there and to the right.”

“Thank you kindly.”

Maomao exited the restaurant at a brisk trot. She’d emptied several bottles of wine; who could blame her if she needed to use the facilities? And even she wasn’t so shameless that she would relieve herself in front of a crowd.

“Say, uh, what *did* you do back there?” the quack’s brother-in-law, still clutching the sheaf of contracts, asked with a perplexed look.

“Nothing much. Like I said, I wanted a fresh flavor, so I added some alcohol.”

Maomao usually kept some herbs and other medical supplies with her—including alcohol for sanitizing purposes. Being intended for sanitizing, it was far more concentrated than your average wine; most people would go down after just a mouthful of it, and the landlord had poured it into his drink gleefully.

“May I ask you something?” the man said after a moment.

“Yes?”

“You put the same stuff in your own drink, right?” He frowned slightly.

“Yes. It was an amount I knew I could handle. I was just hoping things would be over quickly.” Maomao had suspected that if she did anything that looked the least bit suspicious or unusual, her opponents would be drawn in by it. She was sure glad it had worked. She *could* have outdrunk the landlord the traditional way...but she hadn’t been sure she could hold it that long.

“I’m just glad I made it to the toilet in time,” she said.

“Er... Yes, that’s important. Listen, I know you were feeling confident, but I question you risking your own freedom—and for us, no less.”

“I’m sorry, I think there’s been some kind of misunderstanding.” Maomao took the folded contracts from the man. “These are my take. Oh, but I do

have to return the original capital." She grinned.

The brother-in-law couldn't speak, but the quack, who had finally started to come around, exclaimed, "N-Now, just a second, young lady! You're talking about our livelihoods!"

"That's as may be, but I don't have any real obligation there, do I? And anyway, you didn't let me finish talking." She glanced over to where the landlord was getting up off the ground with the help of one of his lackeys, clutching his head and swaying unsteadily. From the vomit on the floor, she gathered they'd forced out the alcohol to help him regain consciousness. "You don't think it would have been better to let him sleep a little longer?" she asked.

"That bet doesn't count!" he cried. *Ah.* She'd expected this. "It was just a way to have a little fun drinking. I was never serious about it."

"And yet I have contracts here. Signed, with witnesses. You're not going to tell me you couldn't read these either?"

"Who cares about a contract? Those are invalid, I say!"

Maomao crossed her arms and positioned herself in front of the restaurant's wine barrel. "I see we're left with no choice." She patted the barrel and smirked at Jinshi and Basen. "We'll just have to tell the government that you've been cheating on your taxes."

You could have heard a pin drop in the restaurant. The landlord looked at her with his mouth open, and the farmers—those who were still on their feet—swayed with the shock. The restaurant owners looked simultaneously anxious and relieved. As for the papermakers, they looked at each other, then at Maomao. The quack simply cocked his head, confused.

This was the source of the mismatched numbers that had so concerned Jinshi.

"Cheating on their taxes? What is that supposed to mean?" the rebellious older son finally managed.

"Making wine requires permission from the government. Doing it for personal consumption might be one thing, but to serve it for profit at a restaurant? Surely that should be subject to taxation." Any business had to pay taxes, and the rate was always higher on creature comforts and luxury items. A bar was taxed more highly than a restaurant (and the rate shot up if you were running a brothel, as Grams never tired of complaining).

Maomao had wondered why this restaurant had been willing to host the

discussion with the landlord. She'd thought perhaps it was because they were tenants of his, but it was the copious quantity of wine that had drawn her attention. Wouldn't it be a blessing for a restaurant if they could stock a large amount of excellent alcohol at a discount price? It was the sort of offer one couldn't ignore, even if it brought a certain amount of trouble along with it.

This, Maomao suspected, was why the landlord hadn't ordered this cloudy wine when he'd wanted a drink. The farmers were probably the ones producing the wine—why would he go out of his way to order something he'd already drunk his fill of?

"And maybe the ingredients are off the books too?" she said. Making wine required rice or barley or the like—in this case, it appeared to be rice. That reminded her of the landlord's alleged grievance: "They're polluting the water and bringing down the quantity of the rice harvest. There isn't enough water to grow the rice," she said, repeating the claim. "But that's not true, is it? If anything, the rice harvest is better than ever."

If the fields used to grow the rice were nourished by the earth and leaf litter that came with the water from upstream, it would help prevent the soil from becoming exhausted. It wasn't as if the papermakers were putting anything toxic or unhealthy into the water; all that would wind up downstream of them was the rice bran they were using in their glue, and maybe the wood shavings that served as the basis for their paper. Excellent fertilizers, in Maomao's opinion. She even thought this might be the reason the previous landowner had been willing to consider selling the land to the villagers outright.

The farmers may not have understood exactly why their rice harvest was suddenly so good, but they clearly knew that it was—and someone had decided to keep the villagers around. Then at some point they had decided to hide the extra income, and to turn it into wine. That would be double tax evasion, a pretty serious matter.

To say all this aloud would have been against her father's teachings, so she kept it to herself—but the expressions on the faces of the landlord and the other farmers made it pretty clear she had the right idea.

"D-Do you have any proof?" one of the farmers demanded.

"Yeah, that's right! Can you prove it?" another said.

Prove it? Maybe, maybe not. But Jinshi was standing right there, so she did have witnesses.

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“Don’t worry,” Maomao said. “If you’re innocent, then presumably you wouldn’t mind if an official were to search your houses?” She made extra sure to smile as she said it. The farmers, who had been so vociferous in their objections until that moment, fell silent. Ahh. Bingo.

“You’ve got guts, girlie,” the landlord said, clutching his still spinning head. “But if you think you can talk like that and get away with it...”

Maomao stood looking down at the landlord. “I might say the very same thing to you. Take a look around, and then consider your words carefully.” At least a third of his hangers-on were collapsed with drink—for that matter, so was he. The rest might still be on their feet, but they were far from sober. Meanwhile, Maomao’s party included six well-built men who hadn’t drunk a drop. (She wasn’t including the quack in this number, of course; he was never going to be any help in a fight.) Above all, they had Jinshi and Basen with them—along with the bodyguards who would come rushing in from outside if anything threatened either of them.

The proprietors of the restaurant were obviously trying to keep themselves out of this as much as possible. Maomao didn’t specifically want to resolve things with violence, but if the farmers decided to get physical, she suspected her friends would respond in kind.

She waved the contracts in the farmers’ faces, smiling her most disparaging smile. “Feel free to go call for help. And while you’re doing that, we’ll send these to the officialdom on the fastest horse we have.” She was so happy, she was practically singing the words. As it happened, someone much scarier than any random official was right there with them.

“Young lady, you seem a little...different from usual,” the quack said, but she decided to ignore him. Instead she looked around at the landlord and the other farmers, none of whom had any answer for her. Finally she whispered in the landlord’s ear: “If you’re going to play the game, at least be ready to get as good as you give.”

She could practically hear him grinding his teeth. She looked coldly at the landlord where he was still lying on the ground and said, “What did the villagers ever do to you, anyway?”

No sooner had she spoken than the door of the restaurant came flying open with a bang. Standing there was a young woman in a tidy robe. The moment she saw the scene inside, she went pale, then came rushing over to the toppled landlord. Just when Maomao thought she was going to stop and

tend to the man, the young lady instead dropped to her knees and bowed her head. “I’m sure my father’s been making outrageous demands again,” she said. “But please! He doesn’t deserve this!” She bowed even more deeply—not to Maomao, but to the paper craftsmen.

“Er... It wasn’t us,” the younger son said, shaking his head, but the young woman didn’t move. She stayed with her forehead pressed into the floor, ignoring the fact that her hair was a mess.

“I’m so sorry. Please forgive him. Please forgive my stupid, pigheaded father.” It was as if she didn’t hear what anyone else was saying.

It was then that the older son made his move. “We wouldn’t mistreat anyone. Sure as hell not your old man.” He took the young woman by the shoulders, calming her and urging her to raise her head. The tears still streamed from her eyes, but she looked at him and nodded.

The landlord reacted with scandal. “You! You nameless nobody from nowhere! Stay away from my daughter!” He tried to scramble up, but his feet were still unsteady and he crashed back to the floor.

“Father!”

“Father-in-law!”

“I’m not your damn father-in-law, and I never will be!”

Well, well, well. Maomao sobered up on the spot. Quack Nephew No. 2 was looking at his brother with some exasperation.

“Don’t tell me...” Maomao said.

“At this point, I doubt I have to,” he replied.

It was suddenly obvious both why the older son was on the farmers’ side—and why the landlord hated the outsiders and was so eager to get rid of them. As much as Maomao was glad to have the mystery resolved, she couldn’t help thinking she might have been just as happy never knowing. It was like watching a bad comedy unfold before her eyes. It hardly warrants describing.

“My brother’s very...earnest.”

“A lot of good it’ll do him if he destroys his whole village with his devotion,” Maomao said, speaking what was on the minds of all the papermakers present. They all nodded along with her. It had been a mistake, she thought, to bring the older brother to this discussion at all—but then, on further reflection, she remembered that he *was* a relative of the quack’s. And so, well, he would be what he would be.

Wait... Am I going to settle for that?! Was she going to stand by and watch an entire village be wiped out because of some ridiculous farce?

There was just one problem: the people involved didn't see it as a farce. To them, it was completely serious. Could it get more absurd? More idiotic? More *stupid*?

Finally Maomao, at the end of her rope, sat down firmly in a chair. "Bring me some wine," she said, gesturing emphatically to the proprietress.

"You're going to keep drinking?" the woman asked.

"Oh, I'm nowhere near my limit."

A collection of disbelieving gazes settled on her when she said that, but it didn't bother her.

Maybe the wine really had gone a little more to her head than she'd thought: it was only after she'd sobered up that she realized she'd been far more voluble than usual.

In the end, it was agreed that the craftsmen's village would be allowed to pay the remaining debt over the next five years, as had originally been agreed. As to the matter of the landlord's payments to Maomao, they were settled with the understanding that he would send a specified quantity of rice to the Verdigris House regularly for the next ten years. Maybe that was taking it a little easy on him, but in any case she strongly suspected government officials would be by to conduct an inspection before too long. It was said they wouldn't look to recoup past losses, however, which was more than generous.

And what became of the quack's nephew and the landlord's daughter?

Like I care!

And that's all there was to say about it.

Chapter 10: Hemp and Folk Religion

"I wonder if *Yue*"—the moon—"is heading safely to the west," the Emperor mused to Gaoshun as they gazed up at the bright disk floating in the sky. His Majesty was not, of course, asking whether the actual moon would safely make its rounds. Rather, it was a familiar nickname for a certain important personage—albeit a nickname that no one in the nation other than His Majesty used.

"They were planning to stop and inspect the papermakers' village on the way, so I would guess they're only about halfway there."

With the eunuch Jinshi gone, Gaoshun had returned to the personal service of the Emperor. For generations, the Ma family had been the protectors of the "flower of the nation," and Gaoshun had been the Emperor's companion since they were young men together, much as his son Basen now was for another. He'd often played hide-and-seek with His Majesty and another milk sibling—but the end of youth had put a stop to such games.

Now it was Basen who guarded the one known as Yue. Gaoshun always wondered if perhaps he should have chosen his other son for the role, but he had given it to the younger boy. Basen was inexperienced, yes, but everyone had at least one redeeming quality. Gaoshun's concerns had only intensified after Basen had failed Yue on their last expedition, but they did have the young apothecary with them; that was reassuring. She was nothing if not bold.

Gaoshun's argument to his son had been that they should take the young woman because it would be disastrous if there were to be any incidents of poisoning on this trip. Eventually he had talked the boy around. As for the Moon Prince, *he* had agreed without a second thought.

He'd known the apothecary herself would eventually acquiesce (even if it involved a lot of grumbling), and the doctor from the rear palace would be with them on at least half the trip. The young woman acted like she didn't think much of the doctor with his slight mustache, but Gaoshun happened to know that in fact they got along quite well.

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The real concern was what they were going to do in the western capital, after they parted ways with the physician.

"I don't suppose it will be easy for him," the Emperor remarked. "I wonder what flowers will gather to him."

"Gathering flowers, sire? An interesting choice of metaphor."

"Well, they'd probably get angry if I compared them to insects. A glance at *my* garden should explain."

He was just kidding—a joke he could make, perhaps, because they were in not the rear palace nor the palace proper occupied by the Empress Dowager or the current Empress, but rather a villa beyond the Imperial court that was currently the residence of Ah-Duo, formerly one of the Emperor's four ladies—as well as his milk sibling and a friend to him and Gaoshun when all of them were young.

If the Emperor looked a little lonely, perhaps it was because Ah-Duo was not here—for she, too, had gone to the west, and in the company of one particular person.

The Moon Prince, meanwhile, was not as flowery as his appearance might suggest. Gaoshun, who had been with him from his youth, who had spent more time with him than either his mother or his father, knew better than anyone. The "prince" was a remarkably direct person, uninterested in ostentation. Even now that his tenure at the rear palace was over, however, they would continue to require his help and effort, for now he must serve as the Emperor's younger brother, doing all those things the sovereign, who couldn't leave the capital, could not do himself.

"So. A plague of insects." A natural disaster which could, potentially, bring an entire country to ruin. Perhaps the note of sadness in the Emperor's voice came from the sense that this was a reflection on his impotence as ruler—if only in the eyes of his more superstitious subjects. It had been he who had chosen to destroy the Shi clan, and had then taken Consort Gyokuyou, one of the four ladies, as his empress. Insect plagues often began with grasshoppers who came in on the wind from the west, from hundreds or even thousands of *li* away. The bugs would flourish in their new home, and what started as a bit of a nuisance, if left unchecked, would grow into positive destruction in the years to come.

Perhaps they were worrying too much—but they had to do *something* about it, and it was the Prince of the Moon who had been entrusted with the

task. This plague of insects would be a problem for more than just Li, however. If the grasshoppers came from the west, it meant they would wreak their destruction there, as well.

Hunger drove people to desperation. Starving farmers would turn to brigandage. As such troubles mounted, they would eventually lay waste to the state—and a wasted state would try to steal from its richer neighbors. It had been the cause of many a war in times past.

The Yi clan, which had ruled the western regions including Sei-i-shuu, or "the Western Yi Province," had been exterminated decades before, during the time of the empress regnant. Their own machinations had led to their destruction, and now the area was ruled by Empress Gyokuyou's father. As things stood, the man was without a clan name, but it was likely the Emperor would bestow one upon him in due time. Indeed, he had originally planned to grant the family a name and *then* make Gyokuyou his empress.

If a war ever did break out, the west would be crucial. That was why he had chosen a lady from that region as his empress. He could well understand why some people felt the move was premature, even though Gyokuyou had already borne him first a princess and now a prince. The place might ordinarily belong by rights to Consort Lihua—but marriage was a political tool, one whose use became ever more stringently dictated the higher one's position was. The Emperor might stand at the zenith of his nation, yet even he sometimes had to consider what would please his father-in-law. The fact that he could be heard to grumble about all this in Gaoshun's presence was perhaps a demonstration of how much he trusted the man.

The Emperor playfully held up his wine cup and chuckled. "It can't hurt you to know, from time to time, your monarch's sufferings." He gazed up at the moon, then drained his cup in a single gulp.

Gaoshun looked off into the distance, thinking mournfully of the lovely man who was now far to the west.

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To the northwest of Li, there was a country called Hokuaren. It possessed extensive grainlands and forest resources, and had a history of being at loggerheads with Li. It was urging from Hokuaren that had prompted the recent spate of attacks by barbarian tribes against Li.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries were nil. They didn't communicate directly, and when they did have contact with each other, it was always with a third country acting as intermediary.

Why are we speaking of all this now? Because of the western capital, the place Maomao was heading at that very moment. There, discussions would be held with important people from other countries—people who could offer indirect connections to Hokuaren.

I never imagined we would be going to the western capital, Maomao thought. She'd felt like her jaw might drop clear through the floor when she'd been informed of their ultimate destination, after leaving the quack village behind. It would take more than two weeks' travel by carriage and boat to reach the western capital. She started to worry about Chou-u and Sazen, whom she'd left behind. But then she concluded, *Eh, they'll work it out.* Her getting all upset wasn't going to change anything, so she put it out of her mind. Instead, she would have to try to get Jinshi to spend as much money on her during the trip as possible.

Anyhow, this was why she found herself being lectured about politics by a rather insistent Basen. Come to think of it, this wasn't the first time he'd tried to explain such things; it occurred to her that he was actually pretty well educated, at least as far as it went. (Not an entirely respectful way to think of it, but oh, well.) She stifled a yawn and tried to listen.

They'd left the quack doctor and Maomao the cat back in the paper village, and they had a long road ahead of them. Jinshi, meanwhile, was still running around with that fake burn on his cheek. Maybe he'd grown fond of it. It was probably easier than having to wear a mask every time they stopped at some roadside inn for the night. They were far enough from the capital by now that Maomao thought no one was likely to recognize the face of the Imperial younger brother, but considering how much trouble it would be to have every young lady on the street catcalling him as they walked along, she decided to leave well enough alone.

"We will stay in this village tonight," Basen said.

Maomao got out of the carriage, rubbing her behind, which was sore from sitting all day. The place was less a village than a small inn town, but to Basen these rustic outposts were probably indistinguishable.

"Don't wander," he added.

Maomao responded by sticking out her hand. “I’m going to go buy provisions.” *And you’re going to give me the money for it*, she clearly meant.

“Are you even listening to me?” Basen demanded, glowering at her. However, someone else dropped a coin purse into Maomao’s hand: Jinshi. “Mas—” Basen started, but managed to stop himself before he said “Master Jinshi.” The bodyguards with them seemed to be under the impression that Basen was the master here.

“I’ll accompany her,” Jinshi said in his altered voice.

Son of a— Maomao thought, glaring at the young man with the burn. Here she’d been hoping for a chance to just relax.

“Are they selling anything interesting?” Jinshi asked, whispering in her ear so no one else would overhear him. His voice was so beautiful it threatened to give her goosebumps, yet it contained an almost boyish curiosity. It was like the last time they’d gone to a city market together. People raised in the lap of luxury got excited about the strangest things.

“It appears hemp production is a major industry here,” Maomao replied. It seemed to be the main material of the people’s clothing. Maybe it wasn’t enough to keep them warm, for many also wore animal skins. And flax seeds were used in the bread sold in the bakeries, as well. The area also produced oil, it seemed, for she could see pots filled with a viscous liquid. That might be the oil-maker sitting nearby, smoking a pipe. Maomao noted that he was smoking dried hemp leaves and frowned.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I just think maybe he’s smoking too much.”

The product of the hemp plant could be used in small quantities as medicine, but smoking it on a daily basis could create an addiction, and wasn’t something Maomao would recommend. Much like opium, it could be medicinal if used sparingly, but was toxic in larger quantities.

“So there are toxins even you won’t touch,” Jinshi said teasingly.

Maomao looked annoyed. “Addictive substances are not to be trifled with. There’s no way to get the poison out of your system, and even if you want to quit, doing so is harder than getting out from under the covers on a cold winter morning.”

“You think? That’s not so difficult, if the room is warm.”

Shit. That’s right. He didn’t understand plebeian metaphors, Maomao

realized. No doubt Jinshi's old attendant lit a brazier to warm the room before he woke. What an awful master he was, to run his old servant Suiren ragged that way. And when he didn't even understand the effort involved. Maomao found herself inadvertently scowling at him.

"Ah, now there's a look I haven't seen in a while," Jinshi said, not at all bothered. In fact, he looked so gratified that Maomao wondered if he was quite all right. If Gaoshun were here, no doubt he would have been pressing his hand to his forehead and giving Maomao a significant look. Jinshi's current companion, Basen, however, didn't have the opportunity: he was busy making preparations at the moment. They would be heading into a much drier region, and they needed horses that were accustomed to the environment. Although they had been changing mounts every day, apparently this was going to involve some entirely new type of horse.

It was a speck of a town—just a few dozen houses scattered around a prominent inn—but a highway passed through the area and allegedly they would be able to obtain the animals. It would take a bit of time, though, to get enough horses together for the carriage as well as all the bodyguards.

"Personally, I'm more interested in buying provisions," Maomao said, looking at the bread displayed at a storefront. Much of it was fried, perhaps owing to the local oil production. Specifically, it was a fried and twisted dough treat known as *mahua*, or "hemp flower," a most appropriate name. "*Includes flax seeds!*" proclaimed a sign by the bread. The fried dough would keep a long time—and more importantly, Jinshi was obviously very interested in it.

I wonder if it'll suit a noble's tastes... Maomao was skeptical, but she nonetheless turned to the old man industriously working his dough. "One please," she said.

"Sure thing, but wouldn't you like a second to go with it?"

"If it's good." Maomao took the mahua, which was wrapped in a bamboo leaf, and took a bite. It was freshly made and still soft and hot; she chewed carefully so as not to burn herself.

Jinshi looked at her. "What, not going to share?"

"I'm testing it for poison," she said, deadpan. It was good that the bread was fresh, and there was enough for all of them. Too much, in fact, to wrap it all in bamboo leaves; instead the shopkeeper gave her a rough-hewn sack (made of hemp fiber, of course), lining the inside with cheap paper to keep

the grease from soaking through.

Jinshi plucked one of the mahua out and took a bite. “It’s all right,” he declared. Frankly, if it had been better than what he normally ate, it would have been time to find a new royal chef.

“Do you really have time to be out here playing, Master Jinshi?”

“Basen looked rather tired after all that happened at the papermakers’ village. Having me out of the way for a while will give him a chance to rest.” Basen was a very poor liar; it must have been taxing for him to pretend to be Jinshi’s superior. In that respect, he wasn’t so different from his father.

As they walked, Maomao spotted a number of other interesting things. The farther west they went, the more animal husbandry there was, so dairy products became more available. She studied a shelf of just such items in a storehouse. An older woman who looked like a housewife was banking a fire in a stove. The main post in the kitchen bore a strange pattern. Every land had its different faiths; here, it appeared they worshipped snakes, or so the pattern seemed to suggest. Jinshi raised an eyebrow at it.

“Excuse me,” Maomao said to the woman.

“Yes?”

“Could we ask for a few of these? We can pay you.”

They were apt to grow tired of portable rations after a while. Maomao wanted to indulge herself and her party, at least for the few days the fresh dairy products would last.

“Hrm. Which ones did you have in mind?” The woman eyed Maomao and Jinshi closely.

“This and this, and—hmm, those. Maybe ten of each. And if you have anything else interesting, we’ll take it.”

“Just a second,” the woman said, fetching the items off the shelf and putting them in a hemp package. “How about that?” She’d looked like she might drive a hard bargain, but she let them have the food at a surprisingly cheap price—and she’d even picked good, fresh items.

“I know we’re imposing. I really appreciate this,” Maomao said earnestly.

The woman broke into a smile. “You never know when the gods might be watching. There’s one right here, after all!” she said, indicating the post.

Hmm, Maomao thought—she of course didn’t buy it. She had nothing against that kind of belief; she only worried that the woman’s generosity might get her taken advantage of. “So you worship a snake here,” she noted.

“That’s right,” the woman replied. “Years when a white snake appears are bound to have a good harvest.”

Superstition it might be, but Jinshi’s face darkened at the remark. He’d no doubt heard the stories about the White Lady. Maybe he had even been tasked with dealing with her. Maomao wished he would keep just a little more distance while she talked to the woman; what with his burn and his grim expression, the woman kept shooting him strange looks.

Maomao had nothing against snakes, but the mention of white snakes specifically was bound to bring something of a frown to her face. She couldn’t help wondering where the mysterious “immortal” had gone.

“It looks like you two are headed west. Best be careful,” the woman said as she packaged the dairy delicately. There was more in there than Maomao had specifically ordered—a little something extra, perhaps, as a kindness.

“Why’s that?”

“I hear there have been a lot of bandits along the highway that direction lately. Even the merchants don’t go that way if they don’t have to.”

Ah: maybe she normally sold these provisions to the merchants. But with fewer customers than usual, better to give Maomao and Jinshi a bargain than not to sell them at all. And the free goods would get a few more things off her shelf.

“I see. Thank you,” Maomao said. “We’ll be careful.” Then she looked at Jinshi to indicate that they should be getting back.

When they reached the inn, the smell of an aromatic tea wafted through the air. It was Basen, relaxing for a moment after having arranged the horses. When he saw Jinshi, he straightened up. “The animals will be ready by tomorrow morning,” he reported. “We’ll have to use one of the local guides, though.” He was referring to one of the cargo transport businesses that used horses to move goods.

“Fine,” Jinshi said, slumping into a chair. Basen gave Maomao a look that obviously meant *Hurry and make tea*, so she shrugged and was about to get fresh hot water when Jinshi said, “It’s all right. I don’t mind it lukewarm.”

“You’re sure, sir?”

If he said so, then fine. There was plenty of water still in the teapot; Maomao simply got some new leaves.

“We heard something about bandits,” Jinshi said, sipping the tepid drink.

“Yes, sir, the same thing was mentioned to me. That’s why we had to bring one of the guides with us as a condition of renting the horses.”

Banditry could take many forms; in this case, they seemed to be the type who wanted to collect a “toll.” If the party didn’t run into them, well and good; but if they did, having someone along who knew the local situation would likely see them escape by simply paying a percentage of their cargo.

Maomao looked at Jinshi and Basen. Both were effectively trained soldiers, and as government officials they couldn’t simply look the other way when it came to banditry—but they didn’t have the forces here to exterminate the criminals either. Neither of them looked very happy about it; Maomao, for her part, simply hoped they wouldn’t even see the brigands.

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Chapter 11: Bandits

"If'n there be any bandits about, I reckon they'll be showin' up 'round about here," their guide said in an accent so thick it almost sounded like he was doing it on purpose. He pointed to a spot on the sheepskin map, a pass between two mountain ranges. The sort of place that practically begged for an encirclement. "They all aren't stupid neither; they won't go out of their way to get themselves hurt. If y' leave about half your goods, they should let you pass. Anyway, we only meet them but about once every three times."

Interesting—at that rate, the merchants would consider using the route. They knew they wouldn't be attacked every time, and taking the long way around required greater time and expense.

"Just think of it as a bit of an expensive toll, good sirs. Anyhow, it's said those bandits are whatcha might call the righteous kind of thieves."

"*Righteous* thieves?" Basen asked, unable to keep a note of indignation from his voice. Maomao worried whether he would be able to hold himself back if they did encounter the outlaws.

Jinshi seemed to have taken a shine to the dry-country horses, and preferred to ride rather than take the carriage. That left Basen with no choice but to go on horseback as well, which in turn left Maomao with the spacious carriage all to herself; she moved some of the luggage aside and made herself a spot to sleep on the floor. Sitting all the time made her backside sore; she thought a bit of lying down might help.

Being of the firm belief that worrying about whether something would happen or not was a waste of valuable time, Maomao determined to go to sleep. If she was really lucky, by the time she woke up they would have passed the bandits' checkpoint.

Sadly, she wasn't lucky.

Before they had made it halfway across the mountains, Maomao found herself tumbling around the carriage. The horses whinnied and the vehicle came to a sudden halt. Forcing her sleepy eyes to stay open and rubbing her

back where she'd bumped it, Maomao looked outside. There were no raiders, but the guide appeared to be explaining something to Basen.

"What's going on?" Maomao asked the driver.

"Ah, it looks like another carriage ahead of ours was attacked by bandits. Probably best to wait here for a while." In other words, they were hoping that by holding station for a few minutes, they could get away without anything happening to them. Someone who had escaped from the attack on the other carriage was there, asking Basen for help. Maomao couldn't tell what the man was saying, but Basen seemed to be managing to hold his anger in check.

That was, until the newcomer showed something to him and Jinshi that made them go pale. Jinshi grabbed it and looked at it closely.

Curious, Maomao got out of the carriage, never mind that she still had bed head. (Or was that floor head?) Before she could make her way over to Jinshi, however, Basen set his horse galloping. Jinshi instructed several of his bodyguards to follow the young man, though by the time he had given the order, Basen was already out of sight.

"You've been asleep," Jinshi remarked.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Maomao said innocently.

"There's a weird pattern on your cheek."

"Anyway, what's going on?" she asked, rubbing her cheek with her hand. Jinshi silently showed her what the other man had brought: a wooden tag branded with an insignia in the shape of a flower. Maomao recognized it: each of the consorts at the rear palace was given such a crest. But who did this one belong to?

"The carriage that was attacked was Lady Ah-Duo's," Jinshi said.

What's she doing here? Maomao thought, but this was hardly the time for such questions. How had she ended up getting attacked, anyway? Ah-Duo seemed like someone who would know perfectly well how to bribe some bandits. She would know better than to needlessly antagonize them.

"Consort Lishu is with her," Jinshi said. That answered some of Maomao's questions, but also made her substantially more anxious. The congenitally unlucky Lishu shouldn't, in principle, have been allowed outside the rear palace—but that was something else Maomao could ask about later.

"Are you sure it's all right, sir?" asked the man who had come for help. When she took a good look, Maomao thought she recognized him from Ah-

Duo's villa. It was unlikely he realized who Jinshi was. He was probably asking about the guards—Maomao had no idea how many bandits there were, but Basen and the handful of guards who had followed him together amounted to no more than five people. It was probably the most Jinshi could spare; he couldn't leave himself too lightly defended. But it begged the question of why he'd sent Basen on ahead. To check on Ah-Duo, perhaps. Hopefully she wasn't hurt.

Jinshi seemed surprisingly blasé. "I'm sure he would have been fine on his own. If he's in time."

"Huh?"

It wasn't long before Maomao discovered what he meant.

When they caught up, they discovered a collection of hog-tied bandits. There had obviously been quite a struggle. The men's reeking clothes had been torn, revealing skin covered in fresh cuts. Cuts were the least of it, in fact; several of them had arms and legs pointing in unnatural directions. What manner of battle had occurred that they had ended up like this?

The bodyguards wore what appeared to be grimy bands tied around their wrists. *What's that about?* Maomao wondered. What did they mean? She observed from a distance, not wanting to get too close to the bandits; some of them were frothing at the mouth.

Ah-Duo's guards were not in much better shape. Thankfully, no one had been killed, but one man had had a good part of his arm chopped off. Maomao got out of the carriage and hurried over to him.

"What in the world?" asked the guide Basen had hired, shocked. His sun-darkened face was practically pale.

"I thought money was supposed to be enough for them," Basen said, fury in his voice. A stern and lovely figure was standing behind him. She was dressed in men's clothing, but she was the former consort, Ah-Duo. She, at least, was uninjured.

"I offered," Ah-Duo said, "but they said they were going to sell the woman. And the one I've got with me is just on loan."

As she listened, Maomao inspected the guard's arm. It hadn't been very long since the wound had been inflicted, but it was a messy cut. Luomen might have been able to reattach a severed limb if the wound was neat enough, but Maomao didn't have the skill. If she'd tried to sew it back on, it

would only have rotted off again. She gritted her teeth and did what she could do. She didn't have enough herbs with her, and as she went to request more medicine, she discovered another familiar face.

"I thought about visiting, but I just couldn't get away." The speaker was another attractive person dressed in men's clothing—Suirei. She was carrying bandages and medicinal herbs.

"You're here too?"

"Yes, although I also questioned whether I was really supposed to leave that villa."

It was certainly a surprise to find her here—and it meant something was going on.

"Are you good at sewing?" Suirei asked as she heated a needle over a flame.

"No more than the next young lady. I feel particularly bad that we don't have any anesthetics or sedatives." She prepared to disinfect.

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While they were practically bantering, the guard's face twisted with pain. The way Suirei held down the quaking man and put a gag in his mouth so he wouldn't bite his tongue proved that she was an old hand at this sort of thing.

The incident with the bandits appeared to represent quite a miscalculation. Jinshi and the others had known that they could hardly pass for a merchant caravan, so instead their story was that a rich lordling had been consigned to a dead-end post in the provinces. But the pirates seemed to guess that the travelers were even more important than they claimed to be.

What with these people along... Maomao changed out of the robe that had been spattered with the guard's blood and headed for Ah-Duo's tent. Jinshi had asked Maomao to hear the story directly from her.

When she entered, she found Consort Lishu there as well, clutching Ah-Duo's hand and showing no sign of letting go. She was shaking almost uncontrollably. Why she was here remained the question that most intrigued Maomao.

Suirei, also freshly changed, was there too. At least it was clear enough why she would be on this expedition: she had considerable medical talents and could effectively serve as a physician on a long journey like this. Still, her presence came with questions of its own.

Why a consort who wasn't supposed to be able to leave the rear palace was here, of all places, seemed a very strange thing indeed; to judge by Jinshi's attitude, though, there was a good reason for it.

"I assume you're wondering why the consort is with us," Ah-Duo said. Her perceptiveness was a real boon.

"Yes, ma'am," Maomao said.

"Have you heard why Sir Basen is going westward?" As Jinshi was in disguise, Ah-Duo had the thoughtfulness and insight to play along.

"I was told there were important discussions taking place there." Supposedly, Jinshi wasn't the only important personage who would be present on behalf of the government. She'd heard that he and the others were going to observe what was going on as well as pursue agendas of their own.

"We're also going to take part in those discussions. With the consort present, we thought it would be best not to travel with too large an entourage. If anything, I daresay we've been treated as third wheels."

That sounded ominous. Maomao still didn't know exactly what role

Consort Lishu was supposed to play in this gathering. Empress Gyokuyou, who hailed from this region, or Consort Lihua, who was related to the Emperor by blood, might have been more obvious choices.

Ah-Duo looked amused by Maomao's evident confusion. She somehow reminded Maomao of Gyokuyou that way. She suddenly had the thought that His Majesty must *like* women like this.

"One of the other tasks we're to attend to on this trip," Ah-Duo told her, "is to find a wife for the Imperial younger brother."

Suddenly, Maomao understood why Ah-Duo seemed to be enjoying herself so much.

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Chapter 12: Problems Accumulate

One thought dogged Maomao: *This is a hell of a thing.*

For important people in this world, there was no such thing as love, only a search for the most appropriate partner to help carry on their bloodline by leaving a child behind. Maomao found herself thinking about why exactly Ah-Duo had brought Consort Lishu with her. *Maybe she's to be given away.*

She had never really been cut out for being one of the four ladies, the Emperor's most-favored consorts. Her family background was distinguished enough, but she'd always lacked the killer instinct that enabled one beautiful blossom of the rear palace to trample on all the others. Instead, she'd always been mocked or ignored in turn by her own ladies. Frankly, she might be happier if the Emperor were to give her away in marriage to someone else.

The issue was whom the Emperor had in mind.

He certainly has a lot to offer as a partner, Maomao thought. But he potentially had even more drawbacks. This was a man so beautiful that he could have brought the nation to its knees were he a woman. Notwithstanding the scar on his face, if and when it came to light that he actually wasn't a eunuch, the reaction would be fearsome indeed.

Could that explain why the consort was attacked?

No, it seemed doubtful... But even as Maomao tried to convince herself that wasn't the reason, she quaked to realize how many of the dots it connected. How many lives would the nation-demolishing beauty turn upside down just by his mere existence?

In any case, the modus operandi of the bandits who had attacked Ah-Duo's carriage was something new. Instead of being "righteous thieves" or whatever and accepting half the travelers' possessions as a toll, they'd been willing to slice off a guard's arm and threaten to sell a young woman for profit. If Basen hadn't arrived with reinforcements, someone might have died.

Then there was the strange band on their wrists—did it serve as a way for the bandits to identify each other?

Thus it was that Maomao found herself lolling on a bed at an inn. The wounded guard was healing up here in town, and meanwhile they were trying to find replacements for the damaged carriage and escaped horses. It wasn't Maomao's job to get provisions this time, and she'd already confirmed that there were no interesting medicines at the local apothecary's shop. Since it was Ah-Duo's man who had been hurt, Suirei was in charge of his care, and her skill was such that there was no need for Maomao to intervene.

Hence, free time. At least until a knock came at the door. Wondering who it could be, Maomao opened the door—and was surprised by who she found.

Consort Lishu stood there, her face covered with a veil. "Pardon me. May I come in?" As ever she seemed skittish, like a small animal.

"Please," Maomao said, and Lishu darted into the room as quick as a mouse. She was looking around anxiously, perhaps a sign that she'd slipped out of her room without telling anyone. Maomao offered her a chair and she sat down, still looking a little overwhelmed. It might have been proper etiquette to offer tea at this point, but if Maomao went asking for hot water, it could very well give away that the consort was here. Instead she decided to offer some mooncakes. Without anything to drink it would leave their throats dry, but, well, it was the thought that counted.

"What's going on? Your ladies-in-waiting are going to get in trouble," Maomao said. "Is your usual chief lady-in-waiting with you?" Maomao didn't think she had seen her around. Lishu had some ladies, but Maomao didn't think she recognized any of them from the rear palace.

"I was told I was the only one who would be leaving the palace. My father assigned the attendants." She spoke softly, but more firmly than Maomao had expected. Maybe she was getting used to the young apothecary. Maomao had helped her out on more than one occasion, and it hurt a little that Lishu always seemed a bit terrified by her.

"What is it you want, then?"

"Er—?"

Lishu seemed surprised, but Maomao knew that if she didn't get her business out of her quickly, it made it all the more likely that they would be found together, and she herself might suffer the consequences. So what was she supposed to do? Maybe a little prompting would help. Lishu was starting to fidget as Maomao said: "Are you going to be betrothed to His Majesty's younger brother?"

She'd decided to dive right in.

"What? No, nothing's been decided yet..."

So the matter wasn't settled—but Lishu *had* heard about it. She also didn't look very happy. What was going on, then?

"Are you feeling guilty about being attacked by bandits?"

"That's not what I'm here to talk about..." Lishu wasn't a good liar, not in the least. Maybe she'd recognized one of the attackers.

"What, then, if I may ask?"

The young woman glanced around again. She wasn't a bad consort by any means, but Maomao was starting to understand why she'd been so thoroughly bullied. She could do with a bit more gravitas.

"Is there a way..." Lishu began. "Is there a way to tell whether a parent and child are...*really* parent and child?"

What was that supposed to mean? Maomao tilted her head slightly, confused.

"I'm talking about myself and my father. I mean...is it possible to tell whether I'm really the daughter of the man named Uryuu?" Lishu looked like she might cry; she could hardly get the words out.

Maomao didn't say anything at first, but lit some calming incense. It was technically Jinshi's, but he could spare it. Only then did she ask, "What makes you ask that?"

She'd heard that Lishu's mother was dead. Her father, thinking of his daughter as nothing more than a political tool, sent her to the rear palace while she was still hardly more than a girl to please the former emperor. Ah-Duo—then the consort of the heir apparent—had taken Lishu under her wing and her protection, Maomao was sure.

Lishu's brow knitted and her lips puckered, and she looked more than ever like she might burst into tears—but she somehow managed to hold herself to a few sniffles as she looked at Maomao and said, "The truth is, I...I was never supposed to go back to the rear palace." Forcing the words out, she explained: even though she'd entered a nunnery after the former emperor passed, her father was still looking for ways to take political advantage of his daughter. At first, she was supposed to be wed to the governor of the south, but the man was old enough to be her grandfather—not to mention he was a lech who may not have been married but kept ten concubines.

Consort Lishu came from the U clan, one of the houses upon which the Imperial family had bestowed a family name. However, under the empress regnant, the nation moved toward a meritocracy, and the influence of one's family name was greatly lessened. Therefore a once-great family might be willing to use any means to advance itself in the world.

"Lady Ah-Duo and His Majesty were the ones who put a stop to that," Lishu said. Catching rumors of the impending union, they'd interceded on Lishu's behalf—but then, that, too, could have been part of her father's plan. A betrothal was nearly as official as a wedding, and to break one required a sufficiently weighty reason.

It would make a lot of sense, Maomao thought. Lishu didn't measure up to the other high consorts—specifically, less in terms of her appearance than of her intelligence and disposition. Ah-Duo had been faced with a choice: watch Lishu be married off to some withered piece of trash, or gain her a respite—even if only for a few years—as one of the flowers of the rear palace. She had chosen the latter—she had chosen a chance at happiness for Lishu.

"I used to be so close to His Majesty that I would sit on his knee," Lishu said.

"Goodness," Maomao remarked. That might have been well and good when Lishu was a little girl, but if she were to do it today, the timorous young lady might simply stop breathing from embarrassment.

Hrm. The world was full of marriages between people of mismatched ages. True, it was typically the man who was older than the woman, but it just wasn't uncommon. Perhaps Ah-Duo had assumed that during her years at the rear palace, Lishu would grow into more of an adult. Again, as a wife of the man who stood at the top of his country's hierarchy, she would hardly be treated poorly.

What did all this have to do with Lishu's question about determining parentage, though? Admittedly, her father had treated her shabbily—but if this was some impulsive emotional thing where she thought they couldn't possibly be related because he had been so cruel to her, then frankly, Maomao was done listening. If her father was so unbearable, then Maomao wished Lishu would have the wherewithal to take advantage of the current talk of marriage to do something about it. She clearly had a pretty good impression of Jinshi; she'd forever been blushing when he came around at the rear palace. And this when she probably could have attracted just about

anyone!

"I've heard my own mother was friends with Lady Ah-Duo," Lishu said.

"Is that so?" If Lishu was a friend's daughter, it would explain Ah-Duo's fondness for her.

"I'm told they often had tea parties with His Majesty, the three of them."

This time Maomao didn't respond at all.

"When they married, my father was adopted into my mother's household. I gather she might have become the heir apparent's consort herself, had things gone differently."

Maomao shook her head and fought the urge to rebut that idea. It struck her as most unlikely. At the time, Ah-Duo had been the consort of the heir apparent—the man who was now the Emperor—and she had already been unable to bear children then. The heir had no other consorts, and the former emperor was wasted with illness. If there had been another potential consort back then...

"My father had already been adopted by the household at that point. But as for me..." *He didn't see me as his real daughter.* "His Majesty's younger brother is a wonderful person. It's just, for me personally..."

She sounded sincere. The consort was just about the age when young women began to fall in love with love. Her saving grace was that at least there were *some* lines she wouldn't cross.

But no... Wait. Lishu was being too circumspect. Maomao had a suspicion about what she was really asking. *She's wondering if the Emperor himself might just be her real father.* And if so, then marrying Jinshi—the *Emperor's* younger brother—would be a rather unpleasant prospect. No matter how you looked at it, he would be a couple branches too close on the family tree.

She didn't want to look into this. At the same time, though, she would feel bad telling the consort she couldn't do it. Laboring under some misplaced pride would have been bad enough, but with Maomao it was worse: she was curious too. She contemplated how one might determine whether an alleged parent and child were related. The most obvious method would seem to be to calculate backward from the delivery date. But no, that would be impossible in this case. She couldn't ask Lishu's father directly, and if she were to raise the subject with the Emperor, her head might soon part ways with her body.

If Consort Lishu had possessed red hair and green eyes like Empress

Gyokuyou, that would have made things even simpler. Lishu was pretty, even cute, but she didn't look all that different from the average citizen of Li. Her hair was black and straight, her eyes likewise dark. Maomao didn't know what her father Uryuu looked like, but it wasn't likely to be distinctive enough to say for certain whether they were related.

This was what had brought Maomao to a particular room at the inn. There, Suirei was preparing medicine, looking grouchy. "What do you want?" she asked. Suirei wasn't very friendly, Maomao thought—conveniently ignoring her own cold streak. Maybe her thoughts showed on her face, but naturally, she didn't care.

There were three patients in the room: the man with the missing arm and two others who had been injured. None of them were in danger of their lives, but they would be convalescing for a while.

Ahhh. Just the smell of this place is relaxing.

The thick stuff Suirei was mixing up was probably something intended to prevent festering. She transferred it to a bowl, then removed the patients' dressings as they grimaced. Maomao and Suirei between them had sewn up the men's wounds, and while it had no doubt been unpleasant, they'd borne it with admirable composure—thanks to which each of them had been stitched up quite neatly.

"Have you got any antipyretics?" Suirei inquired somewhat brusquely as she inspected one of the injuries.

"I have the ingredients."

"Then give some to me. I don't seem to have quite enough."

Sustaining an injury often led to fever, and medicinal components were hard to come by here. Suirei had already been to the local apothecary's shop, but she didn't seem to have come up with much; maybe the place didn't stock many ingredients. This town might be a stopover on a trade route, but the goods, like the merchants, traveled on to other places. They weren't sold here. Maomao wished that better, cheaper medicine were more widely available.

She had left the room to get what Suirei needed when she encountered someone wandering down the hallway.

"Ah, a fine evening to you, young lady," said the guide in his characteristic drawl.

Nothing particularly fine about it, Maomao thought; the man rubbed his

hands together and looked as bashful as if he were Lishu herself.

"Is everything all right, sir?"

"Oh, I'd just got to wondering how those injured men were holding up. I've got here a right fine draught I thought might be of help."

"And how much is this draught?"

"I—I meant nothing of the sort, young lady! I don't seek no payment—just thought about how awful it is being hurt like that."

This smelled extraordinarily fishy to Maomao, but the man was probably just trying to clear his conscience—or cover his neck. After all, he'd been the one who was supposed to see them safely past any bandits, and the guide Ah-Duo had hired had apparently been from the same village as this man. He had also, reports had it, been the first to flee when he realized the bandits weren't the ones he normally dealt with. One of the guards had shouted at him—and that was the moment in which said guard had gotten his arm lopped off.

Trust was paramount in the sort of business these men engaged in. Betrayal by one practitioner could reflect poorly on all the others.

"Here, this is it. It were given to me as a painkiller—do you think it'll work?" The man took out a small pot that contained what looked like brown sugar.

Maomao snatched it from him, and when she showed it to Suirei, she likewise looked very surprised. "How did you get this?" Suirei asked with a hard look at the guide, who quailed at this glare from someone he probably took to be a young man.

"Have you ever used it yourself?" Maomao added.

"W-Well, you see, I don't happen to know how to use it, and I was thinking you both might be able to tell me..." He seemed to be telling the truth.

"I see," Maomao said. "Well, you're very lucky."

If he *had* used it, he might not be doing his job so energetically now. He might not be doing his job at all. The stuff in the vessel did indeed have pain-killing properties, and could be useful as a medicine—but only if you understood what you were doing with it. Otherwise, it could be worse than smoking cannabis.

"We'll use this, and gratefully," said Maomao. "But I want you to tell us exactly how you got it."

The little pot was full of opium.

The problems continued to accumulate—and they turned out to be connected in the strangest ways. The guide said he'd gotten the opium from a merchant traveling with a caravan of entertainers. "It'll help what ails you, and help you forget the cares of this world," the merchant had told him. Perhaps if he'd been a more thoughtful, or more suspicious, man, the guide might have figured out what the merchant meant by that.

That's supposed to be the line you use to sell cannabis.

In the town the guide was based out of, the stuff was dried and smoked. If they'd been planning to treat the opium the same way, it was just as well no one had explained to them what to do with it. The man insisted he never smoked himself. Smoking cannabis could be addictive—and if a cannabis addict began using opium as well... The idea hardly bore thinking about.

The final piece of the puzzle came from what the guide said when Maomao asked him to describe the merchant caravan. He'd said: "I got a glance—just a glance, y'see, but I saw her. There was this girl. The entertainers really seemed protective of her. I mean a young girl, maybe just fifteen." And this had been roughly a year ago. "She had white hair—I've never seen the like. Can't forget it. She was the incarnation of the serpent god, I'm sure of it, come secretly to earth. This is the first time I've ever told anyone what I saw..."

We need hardly spell out what Maomao thought of when she heard about a woman with white hair. A year ago would place these events before that woman had come to the capital.

Perhaps it was the man's naive faith in the woman that had caused him to take the opium at face value, as a painkiller and nothing more. He, Maomao reflected, was truly a lucky man.

And there was reason enough to be grateful for the medicine; it salved the pain of the injured men. Opium didn't have a particularly long shelf life, and Maomao had worried it might not be effective, but it proved otherwise. She felt bad for the guide with his heartfelt beliefs, but she decided to requisition all the opium he had. She paid him for the product, including enough extra that he couldn't complain.

As long as we're piling up problems, let's throw on one more. One of the bandits bore a tattoo of a snake, and the bands they all wore around their

wrists had initially been white and depicted two snakes in coitus. Unfortunately, despite attempts to get some answers, the men were in no shape to tell them anything.

All the bandits were opium addicts.

Chapter 13: The Western Capital—Day One

This swell of problems remained unresolved, but the good news was that they reached their destination without further complications. Jinshi—perhaps mindful of the presence of Ah-Duo and Consort Lishu—didn't even needle Maomao, who for her part got to spend plenty of time with Suirei. They were both apothecaries, but having learned under different masters, they both had their own ways of mixing medicine, and it was fun to discover new approaches.

Gradually the green around them faded, replaced by an expansive vista of pebbles and sand. It was the first time Maomao had ever seen sand stretch out so far that it looked like water, and she couldn't suppress a sound of amazement. She wrapped a cloth around her head so the sand wouldn't get in her eyes, and although the sunlight reflected off the ground could be blinding, when they made camp for the night it was astonishingly cold. This was far beyond anything Maomao had imagined for this trip. She was grateful that whoever had packed clothing for her *had* anticipated the situation—but she felt a little more conflicted that they had even gone so far as to pack underwear for her.

They'd been warned to be careful at night, when scorpions and poisonous snakes were most active: Suirei, with her phobia of such creatures, set up a veritable wall of bug- and snake-repelling incense, so they hardly saw anything of the sort. Much to Maomao's disappointment.

If there was one person who had it even worse than Maomao, it was Consort Lishu. Being a consort, she rarely showed her face among the rest of the company, and with her ladies-in-waiting always sticking close, the retiring young woman didn't have many chances for proper conversation. The nearest thing to a respite was that Ah-Duo was thoughtful enough to chat with her from time to time.

Ah-Duo... How would she respond if it turned out that Lishu really was

secretly the Emperor's child? His Majesty hadn't had any other consorts besides her when he had been heir apparent. Would Ah-Duo feel conflicted about that or take it in stride? One thing was for sure: it would put a new spin on everything she'd appeared to be doing out of the goodness of her heart. In fact, it would raise the possibility that she'd known all along.

Argh. I don't want to think about it.

Of course His Majesty wouldn't lay and hadn't laid a hand on such a girlish young woman—well, not just girl*ish*, but literally still a girl. But what then did that mean for Jinshi as a prospect? It wasn't so unusual for the powerful to marry near relations. Nieces and aunts, even half-sisters, had been admitted to the rear palace in the past. The issue was that if a bloodline got too thick, it could make all of its members vulnerable to a single disease, for example, that might kill them all off. Maomao found herself wondering if the mistakes of the former emperor's reign were to be repeated.

In any case, she breathed a sigh of relief when they arrived at the western capital. The city had grown up around an oasis—such a precious resource in the desert—and the sandy wind blew through streets that bustled with a life quite different from what one found on the Emperor's doorstep. If the royal city was laid out with the straight, clean lines and intersections of a Go board, the western capital appeared a far more chaotic affair.

"I've heard about this. You can see how easy it would be to get lost here," Jinshi said, the first time Maomao had heard his voice in quite a while. Ah-Duo seemed to have guessed who he was, but the others still appeared ignorant. Except perhaps Suirei—but if she had figured it out, she kept quiet about it.

One can only imagine how Lishu would react if she discovered that the "beautiful prince" had been her traveling companion this entire time. Would she see him as a potential marriage prospect—or perhaps as a half-brother, or rather an uncle?

Jinshi had finally washed the burn off his cheek for good, although wearing the makeup for close to a month had left a stain on his cheek, and he rubbed at it self-consciously.

The other eminences and the messengers from other nations had already arrived, and the western capital had a festive atmosphere. There was a market set up, and the sound of firecrackers could be heard. Between milky-white walls and dusty red roof tiles were awnings stretched out to stave off the sun.

At the butcher's, it wasn't only chicken they saw, but sheep as well. Maomao was nearly distracted by the heavily herbed dishes being served up at the street stalls, but the party continued resolutely toward a mansion by the water source.

The building materials of the house—wood, and plenty of it—spoke to the power of the house's owner. The proximity to the water source meant there was plenty of greenery. Not many of the broad-leaved plants Maomao was used to, but she saw a variety of unfamiliar plant life.

In front of a magnificent gate, a gentle-looking middle-aged master and several servants were waiting for them. First Jinshi, then Ah-Duo, climbed out of the carriage. Jinshi's appearance inspired a great many wide eyes—even among his own party. So they really hadn't known it was him.

Standing before them was a radiant, lovely noble. Maomao found herself taken in by the man's face; the kindly look in his eyes invited a sense of intimacy. "Welcome, welcome; you've made a long journey. I'm You Gyokuen, the leader of this land." He acted awfully familiar, but he seemed to be approaching them in good faith. "I must thank you for taking such fine care of my daughter."

Ah! Maomao finally understood who the middle-aged man was, and why he seemed so familiar. His hair and eyes were dark, but his attitude was very much Gyokuyou's.

"Nothing is worse than a very long trip followed by a very long talk. You'll find bathing supplies in your rooms. Please, take your time and relax."

"Now, that's a relief. Thank you," Jinshi said and entered the house, Maomao following after.

Are they sure about this? Maomao thought, shocked when she saw the room she'd been assigned. Sure, she was there as a servant of the Emperor's younger brother, so they could hardly stick her in some dusty corner, but the room they led her to was far beyond her station. A thick, luxurious carpet covered the floor—from the feel of it, it wasn't just fur; there was silk or something mixed in. The canopied bed was hung with a delicately embroidered curtain, while the table was set with a glass cup with a silver handle. There was a basket of dried jujubes, and the whole thing looked like something out of a picture scroll of a foreign fantasy.

They aren't going to steal our money later, are they? Maomao thought

idly as she bit into one of the fruits. Without the water in the flesh, the sweetness was more concentrated—it was good, but it was a little *too* sweet for Maomao, who decided to stop at just one.

She would have liked to explore the mansion a little, but she thought someone might get angry at her for wandering around without permission. For today, at least, they would each eat separately and get some rest. Starting tomorrow, there would be several days of banquets and dinner parties, while the afternoons would be filled with meetings and business. Important people sometimes seemed to want to celebrate every little thing with a big party, regardless of how tired the guests might be feeling—but like his daughter, Gyokuen was too alert and thoughtful to do that to his visitors.

Maomao was particularly grateful that he had even prepared a bath for them, given that water must have been among the most precious things here. Even if she did find the tub, carved from a single massive piece of marble, a little intimidating.

She got out of the bath and went out on the balcony. Her hair seemed likely to dry quickly, but out here she would get covered in dust again, so she made to go back inside—but the sound of talking voices brought her up short. She looked around but saw no one. The voices seemed to be coming from the next room. *Well, well. Not going to keep it down?*

There was no point in the rooms' deliberately thick walls if they were simply going to leave the windows open. She could hear everything. She leaned against the railing, then leaned out over it a little. There was peeping, and then there was peeping.

"What are *you* doing here?"

Hmm. A woman's voice, still young. The next room belonged to Consort Lishu, but the voice wasn't hers. Next there came something mumbled so softly Maomao couldn't make it out—perhaps that was Lishu.

"Oh, really? And so what? You just want to get in my way! You're always in my way!" The woman was obviously upset with Lishu. On some level, Maomao was actually happy to hear someone being openly hostile for once. But the words were followed by the sound of a slap.

Maomao went back into her room, then peeked out into the hallway. From next door emerged a woman who practically oozed elegance. She hid her mouth with a folding fan, but her nose was distinctly up in the air. The ladies-in-waiting attending outside bowed to her; two of them followed the young

lady, while the last went into the room. Tossing everyone out so the two women could have their fight was well and good, but maybe Maomao should advise the young lady that next time she ought to close the windows too.

When she was sure that the unfamiliar woman had disappeared around the next corner, Maomao went and knocked on the door of Lishu's room. The lady-in-waiting answered it, looking relieved when she saw it wasn't the young woman come back for more.

"Might I come in?" Maomao asked, loudly enough that Lishu could hear her. The lady-in-waiting retreated into the room at a brisk trot, but soon came back. "Please, enter," she said. Maomao had known that Lishu's usual chief lady-in-waiting wasn't with her on this trip, but the replacement seemed rather businesslike.

Consort Lishu was sitting in a chair as Maomao entered, but from the disheveled state of the blankets on the bed, Maomao guessed the young consort had tried to bury herself under the covers after that unpleasant encounter. The pillow was stippled with wet spots, and Lishu's hair was in modest disarray. She wouldn't quite look at Maomao—not because she didn't want to make eye contact, but, it seemed, in an attempt to hide the slap mark on her cheek, which looked red and hot.

"May I see it?" Maomao prompted. Lishu didn't say anything, but when she realized Maomao was perfectly aware of what had happened, she obediently raised her head. "Perhaps you could fetch some water for us," Maomao said to the businesslike lady-in-waiting. The woman gave her a frankly mistrustful look, and Maomao decided to give her a little push: "Gracious, and you were so ready to leave the room for the last visitor." That got the woman going.

Maomao stood in front of Lishu and took her chin in her hands. Her cheek was warm, but it would soon cool. "May I see the inside of your mouth? Just in case?"

Lishu looked a little embarrassed, but she opened her mouth as Maomao asked. Her pretty white teeth were all safe, and there didn't appear to be any cuts on her cheeks or tongue. *But what's this?* Maomao, intrigued, stared fixedly into the young woman's mouth. Lishu started getting more and more awkward, until Maomao finally felt bad enough about it to stop looking.

"Seems you had a rather violent visitor. May I ask who that was?" Maomao said.

“It was my half-sister,” Lishu replied.

After the death of Lishu’s mother, her father Uryuu had swiftly taken another wife. His new mate had previously been a concubine of his, and Lishu already had half-siblings at that point. The young woman earlier, an older sister, was one of them. Lishu’s parents had been second cousins, and much like with the Shi clan, Lishu’s mother had belonged to the main house of the U clan, which had then adopted her father. What differed from the Shi clan was the treatment of Lishu, the daughter of Uryuu’s proper wife. Her mother’s parents, Lishu’s grandparents, had already died, leaving true power in Uryuu’s hands. He questioned his wife’s chastity and, as a result, roundly ignored Lishu—a rather small thing to do, Maomao thought, when he’d already had children by a concubine. If she really was secretly the Emperor’s child, wouldn’t her father have seen that as an advantage to be exploited in and of itself? And anyway, to all appearances he favored Lishu’s older sister.

“All those questions about parents and children... Were they perhaps inspired by your honorable elder sister?” Maomao asked. Lishu didn’t respond, but Maomao took her silence as affirmation. “And the reason you refused to quite finish your thought when it came to those bandits—was it because you had a certain guess about who was behind it?”

Maomao didn’t want to think about it, but it was by no means outside the realm of possibility that an older sister might grow jealous of a younger and try to have her assassinated.

This time Lishu reacted: “I’m afraid I just don’t know.” Her expression, though, at least conveyed that she’d been the subject of considerable cruelty.

They were going to eat individually this evening, so Maomao had an idea. “Might I dine with you tonight, milady? Perhaps we could ask Lady Ah-Duo to join us.”

At Ah-Duo’s name, Lishu’s face broke into a glow. Maomao fully expected Ah-Duo would accept the request, and this would give her a good excuse to check Lishu’s food for poison. Someone who was willing to send bandit-assassins certainly wouldn’t hesitate to stoop to poisoning a meal.

Maomao didn’t know whose child Lishu might really be, but whoever it was, it was no fault of her own. The thought made her feel bad for the young woman—yes, even Maomao had at least that much compassion in her.

Ah-Duo gladly accepted their invitation to dinner. When she asked for all

of their meals to be delivered to a single place, the chef thoughtfully prepared a room for them, a place with a domed ceiling of colored glass that had presumably been acquired from points farther west. When the light hit it, it glowed like a jewel.

"Quite a place," Ah-Duo said, stroking her chin and nodding knowingly. Consort Lishu's eyes glowed almost as brightly as the glass. Maomao, meanwhile, wondered what they had done to the glass to give it those colors. "You're sure it's all right for us to use it?" Ah-Duo asked the chef, who smiled.

"The young mistress used to eat with her friends here all the time, but it's gone all but unused in recent years." (The young mistress—could he mean Empress Gyokuyou?) "The entire structure was moved here from another land, where it originally served as a place of worship for their deity. You're more than welcome here, so long as that doesn't bother you. Naturally, you won't run into any worshippers, though!"

Fair enough: it did feel a little strange. This country didn't have some kind of policy of expunging heretics, but neither would Maomao have wanted to be pressed to convert.

"Doesn't bother me," Ah-Duo said.

"If Lady Ah-Duo accepts it, then certainly..."

"How'd they make that glass?"

Pleased to see that there would be no fuss, the chef ordered a server to begin setting places for dinner. The room was scrupulously cleaned; he ran a finger along the surfaces like a mean-spirited mother-in-law to see if any dust had been left behind, but came up with nothing.

Ah-Duo reported that she had invited Suirei, but the woman had declined. Ah-Duo seemed oddly fond of Suirei, but there was one odd facet to the math of the meal: with four of them there, it would have seemed a bit like a two-on-two matchmaking meeting, even if they were all women.

Maomao felt like some shadow, some hidden figure was watching them wistfully from across the hallway, but she chose to ignore it. Instead the three of them enjoyed the exotic atmosphere and the delicious meal.

"I'll be happy to clean up here," Maomao said. The meal was over and she decided to send Ah-Duo and Consort Lishu back first. Ah-Duo's room was diagonally across from Lishu's, so she was confident they wouldn't have

any trouble with the consort's bullying elder sister.

"I'll help," Ah-Duo offered.

"No thank you, ma'am. I only meant I would call a server."

Ah-Duo had dismissed their waiter after the food had arrived, on the grounds that she wanted to sit and talk. Truthfully, though, it had mostly been her and Lishu talking, with Maomao offering only the occasional polite interjection. They spoke of all that had happened on the trip, shared passing memories, and remarked on how lively this city was. Ordinary conversation, to be sure, but Lishu clearly enjoyed it; she smiled the entire time.

Gyokuyou's family house turned out to be quite large; Maomao found herself nearly lost trying to find the server.

*Pretty sure I should take a right here...*she thought as she walked along, when she sensed someone behind her. Each time she moved, she heard footsteps follow her, but they stopped whenever she did. She turned around to discover Basen looking at her awkwardly.

She didn't say anything.

He didn't say anything.

Finally she asked, "Is something the matter, sir?"

"Oh, uh, not at all," he replied, but, ever the terrible liar, his eyes darted away tellingly.

"Are you lost, sir?"

"Wh-Who, me? *No*..."

Maomao found herself increasingly worried about whether Basen was going to survive as Jinshi's right-hand man. It was almost comical to watch him. Pressing the issue right now would only have been cruel, however, so she pretended to play along.

"Since you're here, then, perhaps you could walk me to my room. It's quite a ways to the annex."

"Yes, I suppose it would only be chivalrous," Basen said. As Maomao recalled, his room was in the building next to hers. If she could get him that close, even he couldn't get lost going the rest of the way.

What a lot of trouble he could be. Maomao was decent enough to help, but not to entertain him by chatting as they went—not if he was going to be this much of a pain. She'd thought they might end up walking along in silence, but Basen actually began a conversation.

"Say, do you know what sort of person Consort Lishu is?" he asked, his

words punctuated by the tapping of their footsteps.

"I have to think Master Jinshi would be better placed to answer that question than I am. Perhaps you should ask him."

"That's the whole problem. I can't," Basen replied, obviously very serious.

Ah hah. I see. Basen was evidently aware that one of the goals of this expedition was to find a wife for Jinshi—and he was trying to sound out one of the candidates, the relatively easy-to-read Lishu.

"I think it's a rather complicated question," Maomao said at length.

Lishu could be a timid crybaby, and she still seemed very young in many ways—but by the same token, one could say she still possessed her innocence. Not everybody was fond of someone who acted so childish, but Lishu was a basically lovable person who might appeal to a man's protective impulse.

"You mean it?"

"Why should you doubt me?"

Basen looked at her with his arms crossed; Maomao motioned him over and led him out of the hallway, hiding behind a rock in the garden. It was cold out, and she wanted to get this over with.

"Because both Master Jinshi and my father hesitated when they heard that name."

"Hesitated about what?" She was trying to play dumb, and if it turned out he knew about the rumors that Lishu was the Emperor's daughter, Maomao would try to talk around it.

Basen, though, began mumbling quickly: "She's part of the U clan, and they've been throwing their weight around a bit too much for comfort lately. Not enough to be grounds for refusing her, but... No, in fact..."

"Please don't just mutter to yourself, sir," Maomao said, conveniently ignoring her own habit.

"You won't tell anyone what I'm about to say?"

"If that's the condition, I'd rather not hear it."

"You've heard this much! Let me get it off my chest!" He leaned over and whispered in her ear: "They're talking about giving Consort Lishu away in marriage. Specifically, to Master Jinshi."

"Goodness gracious."

She'd already known, so her show of surprise was superficial at best. It

seemed to annoy Basen.

"Doesn't this bother you? Don't you think it's terrible?"

"Ahem. I just figure I ought to be more worried about myself than someone else. Seeing as I'm past my prime already."

"Now that you mention it, I suppose you're right."

The fact that he agreed so readily perhaps explained why he didn't seem to be very popular with the ladies.

Jinshi and Consort Lishu. They were just the right ages for each other—Jinshi twenty, and Lishu sixteen. Appearance-wise, Jinshi looked a little older—er, *more mature* than he was, but they would still look perfectly ordinary together. Notwithstanding Empress Gyokuyou's son, Jinshi had a quite significant claim to the throne; meanwhile, Lishu would surely flourish better with Jinshi—who had no other wives as yet—than she did amidst the brutal competition of the rear palace.

In such a situation, Lishu might not end up becoming a mother of the nation, but she could very well at least be a prime minister's wife. Granted, it would make her the enemy of all the country's women and no small percentage of the men, but she was also important enough that they wouldn't be able to get rid of her *too* easily.

Powerful people had to play their marriages politically. For them, the "free love" advocated by Maomao's sister Pairin was nothing but a fantasy. Even considering the shadow of Lishu's possible familial closeness to Jinshi—well, even if it were true, they came from different mothers. It would be all right. Not ideal, perhaps, from a health perspective, but Basen probably didn't know about that part of the situation anyway.

At the moment, Lishu looked like the strongest candidate. Maomao stared fixedly at the man beside her: Basen, Jinshi's milk brother, must understand that as well as she did. And yet the idea seemed to vex him, somewhere deep down.

Maomao thought she knew what it was. Simply put: *he's imagining her as a sister-in-law.* Basen wanted to find out for himself if she was good enough for the beautiful, highly capable master he served.

"My father really didn't look pleased about it," Basen said. It seemed that was what had gotten him started on this.

Understandable, Maomao thought. After all, Gaoshun probably knew more about Jinshi's and Lishu's births than Basen did.

As for Jinshi himself, he could probably go either way on Lishu. She was certainly pretty enough, and with a few more years she would presumably gain some maturity. She couldn't be called naturally gifted, but neither did she seem likely to go out of her way to make his life difficult. All right, so her family relationships might be a little complicated—but what marriage didn't bring some squabbles with the in-laws?

"She might have some sort of *flaw*," Basen said, practically champing at the bit.

Maybe don't put it like that, Maomao privately advised him. If anyone heard, he might wind up with a good beating.

"If you're so concerned, why don't you go see her yourself?"

"What?"

"Of course, you have no acquaintance with her now, and on this particular expedition she wears a veil every time she appears in front of a man. But she'll open up as she gets to know you. At least a little."

Indeed, Lishu now sometimes talked in Suirei's presence. She never spoke to Suirei directly—she was under the impression that Suirei was a man—but still. Maomao was just glad Lishu hadn't known Suirei in her time at the rear palace. They might have crossed paths once or twice, but nothing that had stayed in Lishu's memory.

"It was you and your men who rode to the rescue of Lady Ah-Duo's carriage, wasn't it? The perfect excuse to call on her—and to get a little closer to Consort Lishu while you're at it."

"Er... Yes..." Basen sounded rather half-hearted, and wouldn't quite meet her eyes. "I only worry... Well, she's a woman... And aren't women afraid of the likes of me?"

Uh, what? Maomao simply didn't know what he was getting at. "This from the man who barely escaped my brothel with his virginity."

"Quiet about that!" Basen exclaimed, blushing furiously at the thought of Pairin. Unfortunately, his shouting seemed to have attracted attention. They could hear footsteps coming toward them.

Basen clapped a hand over Maomao's mouth, his grip so strong that she almost groaned in pain. *He's the one who shouted!* she fumed, but she stayed quiet.

"Is someone there?" a voice asked politely. What sounded like several people were coming closer. Maomao thought she could hear Basen's heart

pounding next to her; he still hadn't let her go. *He's got strength, if nothing else*, she thought, grimacing with discomfort and hoping he would let her go soon.

It was hard to tell in the dark, but it looked like a group of three men. They stopped, but one of them came closer, until he was only a boulder's distance away from Maomao and Basen.

"Maybe I was hearing things," the man said, and turned to leave.

Then, however, a familiar voice said: "Perhaps. But what in the world has become of Basen?"

Basen stifled a gasp; now his heart was really racing. There was a cracking sound, a twig snapping.

Oh, for...

Jinshi, searching for Basen, was there. And helping him were none other than the bespectacled Lahan and the thirtyish dandy, Rikuson.

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Chapter 14: The Western Capital—Day Two

The next day, Maomao found herself summoned by none other than Lahan.

"True, true, I did neglect to mention," the fox-eyed man with the tousled hair said as he sipped some tea. Beside him sat the mild-mannered Rikuson. They were in a bower at the mansion, the nearby oasis making the place breezy and cool. The entire house seemed built to maximize the opportunities to cool off. "I was ordered to come here, myself, for a number of reasons. There are, I guess you could say, business matters to attend to."

Everyone had their talents, Maomao supposed, and Lahan could be expected to come running any time hard numbers were involved. As for why Rikuson was with him...

"My superior doesn't want to leave the capital, so I've come in his place."

"Huh," Maomao observed. "He sounds like a most useless superior, sir, I must say."

"I do appreciate your frankness, Maomao, but here and now I think a modicum of discretion is in order." It was one of those rare things: a serious-minded comment from Lahan. Anyway, Maomao understood that perfectly well; that's why she'd been careful to adopt a polite tone.

It had been late after her encounter with Basen and then Jinshi, so Maomao had gone straight to bed—but apparently everyone else had stayed up, and the results had not been pretty. It all sounded like it had been a lot of trouble, though, and Maomao had done her best to ignore it. She still had red marks where Basen had grabbed her, and her main interest at the moment was getting rid of them.

Speaking of Jinshi and Basen, they had a meeting this afternoon. All this stuff about conducting politics over dinner and constantly trying to sound each other out seemed like a massive headache to Maomao. It would be bad enough dealing with Gyokuen, who now had an empress for a daughter, but

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throw outlanders into the mix and the thought only became more depressing.

"So what was it you wanted to talk to me about?" Maomao asked.

"Yes, that." Lahan slid his spectacles up the bridge of his nose with his pointer finger. Then he took out a piece of paper from the folds of his robe. It turned out to be a finely detailed wanted poster.

"Huh..."

The picture showed a woman, still relatively young, with graceful features. That in and of itself made her little different from many women, but the poster also bore further description: "Red eyes; white hair; pale skin." *That* narrowed it down quite a bit. In fact, Maomao could think of only one person who fit the description.

"The White Lady? We went to see her together."

"Yes, we did," Lahan said, and proceeded to show her a second piece of paper.

"Who's this?"

Another wanted poster, this one showing a man. Unfortunately, an illustration never quite looked like the real thing—and Maomao rarely bothered remembering the faces of people who didn't interest her, anyway. In short, she had no idea who the man was.

Lahan lined up the wanted posters next to each other.

Hm? Something teased at the edges of Maomao's memory, a sense that maybe she *had* seen the man somewhere.

"We found this man several days ago," Lahan said.

"That's right," Rikuson added, "I'm sure of it."

"Sir Rikuson never forgets a face."

"Perhaps my one skill," he said modestly. All right, so he still didn't seem exactly suited to soldiering. But given that the eccentric strategist who served as Rikuson's boss couldn't distinguish one face from another, having someone with a talent like Rikuson's around couldn't hurt. That freak with his monocle had a talent for judging other people's uses that seemed almost superhuman.

"When exactly was this?"

"About two days ago. I don't think he expected us to find him—he was posing as one of the porters bringing in cargo from the carriages." And what's more... "The cargo in question belonged to a merchant from Shaoh."

Shaoh: a country beyond the desert region to the west of Li. It was located

in a rather precarious place; to the south there were mountains, but on the other three sides it was surrounded by larger nations. As Maomao recalled, the two special emissaries who had visited the court the year before had come from Shaoh.

And one of those emissaries had been supplying feifa firearms to the Shi clan.

Maomao's face darkened. "That's a bad thing, right?"

"Generally speaking, I would say so."

It meant that the same people who'd been causing trouble in the capital were now showing up among the merchants from Shaoh. And if they were connected to the White Lady, then there was every possibility that they were moving opium and were involved with the bandits. Even the politically dense Maomao could understand that if another nation was harboring people like that, it was a bad sign.

"What's worse, Shaoh likes to keep to itself." In other words, even if they were out to catch a criminal, they couldn't simply barge around. "Normally, we wouldn't be able to get our hands on him," Lahan continued. And yet it was hard to imagine that someone who'd come to an entirely separate nation was acting totally independently of his government. "But we can't say anything about it. That's the problem."

Their testimony, ultimately, came from just a single soldier who allegedly had a good memory. Regardless of what Rikuson said, people could easily object that he was just one person; he could very well be mistaken about whom he'd seen. Lahan could try to inform the capital, but even if they found the fastest horse in the world, it would take more than ten days to deliver the message—and the same again to bring back any reply.

All this, apparently, was what had brought him to Maomao.

"What are you getting at?" she asked.

"I want you to be at the banquet. That's why you've got a room, isn't it? Here, at this moment, you're a princess of the La clan."

Maomao didn't say anything, but her expression provoked a knitted brow from Lahan. "Ahem. Please don't bare your fangs...er, teeth at me. Who knows who might be watching? Look, even Sir Rikuson is afraid of you."

"I haven't seen anything at all, sir and ma'am." Rikuson was looking studiously at the blue sky as if nothing were happening. Maybe he was a better man than Maomao had given him credit for.

In short, the business negotiations in question made this man too important to refuse, whether or not he was a real merchant. But if there was more to him than met the eye, there could be trouble. If he was the real thing, might the White Lady be with him? And if so, could she have cooked up some unknown poison with her alchemy? Or perhaps they might simply use narcotics. They may even have some other plan in motion.

"There might be rare poisons involved. Aren't you curious?" Lahan said. A dirty trick. If he thought that was going to get Maomao to go along with him... "If we catch the man, you're free to investigate exactly what kind of poisons they are."

This time she said nothing, and her face remained neutral.

"Of course, if you're not interested, then that's that..."

Maomao heaved a sigh, and Lahan grinned openly. Yes, it was true: he had her. But she hated agreeing for free. She would receive an honorarium, of course, but she wondered if there wasn't something else she might ask for. Consort Lishu flashed through her mind.

"So you can remember anyone you see once, is that right?" she asked, turning toward Rikuson.

He finally brought his gaze down from the sky. "Yes, ma'am. Not a very interesting talent, I must admit."

"All right. Then can you determine from people's faces whether they're related by blood? Whether they're parent and child, say?"

"I suppose I could try," Rikuson said. Every child received *some* physical features from their parents, and Maomao had thought perhaps Rikuson could see or sense such things. But he said, "However, it would only be my subjective opinion. Without some very good reason, it could hardly be called proof of anything."

"He's right," Lahan interjected, earning a dirty look from Maomao.

"Isn't there any way, then?"

Lahan, too, seemed to see a world that others didn't. She wished she could put that to use somehow.

"You think any so-called proof that I discovered would be accepted by anyone else?" he asked.

Maomao was forced to agree with him. Without clear, measurable criteria, there would be no way of establishing the truth of his judgments, even if he was right. Children might receive any of a number of distinguishing physical

features from their parents, but they wouldn't be identical, and anyway, they would only suggest a possibility. If only there was something, some standard everyone could agree on.

"My sincere apologies that I can't be of more help," Rikuson said.

"Please, think nothing of it."

"Forgive me if I'm overstepping myself," he added hesitantly, "but perhaps you could come to Master Lakan's mansion sometimes?"

After a long beat Maomao said, "Perhaps I could ask you never to mention that again." Her face twisted in disgust. This man Rikuson seemed like a perfectly decent human being, but he didn't seem to understand that there were things one spoke of and things one did not.

"My apologies," Rikuson said, ducking his head in a bow. "I think I'd better be getting back to work." Then he hustled out of the bower.

Lahan looked at Maomao, his face not quite settling into any one expression. "Have you no interest in coming?"

"To that banquet of yours? You know what? Forget it." With Rikuson gone, she began talking rather less politely.

"Oh, don't get all huffy. This stuff the western merchant is dealing in—don't you want some of it?"

So he was going to stick with the attempt to bribe her. Well, of course she wanted it. Maomao went silent, and Lahan looked at her closely. He seemed to be thinking about something.

"You know, come to think of it..." he said after a moment.

"Yes?" Just because Maomao was angry didn't mean she couldn't be halfway polite. She took a sip of the tea the server had brought them.

"Last night... You and Sir Basen... Anything going on?"

Maomao had enough maturity not to simply spit the tea out, but it suddenly tasted very bitter. She swallowed it as quickly as she could. What did *that* have to do with this talk of parents and children?

"Master Basen is a vir—"

"I know, I know, you don't have to say it. Good heavens, stop already. You don't have to go blabbing a man's most embarrassing secrets to everyone you meet."

He was right; it had been an impolite thing to say. Even if it was patently obvious to look at him, she could understand where a young man of his age might not want to announce such a fact. If he was really that embarrassed

about it, she was sure her sister Pairin would be kind enough to teach him. Pairin liked a well-muscled man—why not indulge her?

"You aren't thinking of anything...inappropriate, are you?" Lahan smirked.

"I don't know what you mean."

She certainly hadn't been imagining shoving Basen into Pairin's room.

"I'm sure you don't. In that case..." He took a half breath, and then he said something unimaginable. "Perhaps you'd be interested in asking the Emperor's younger brother to plant his seed in your belly."

It briefly occurred to Maomao that no one would blame her for dousing him with the rest of her tea, but as they were in someone else's house, she refrained. She did not, however, dignify his comment with a response.

"I know you—you'd like to try giving birth, just for the experience. But you have no interest in children as such. Me, I would be happy to raise the child of the Emperor's younger brother, and I would do a good job of it. Meanwhile, you could do what you like, or perhaps, not do what you don't like. I'm not necessarily suggesting you formally become his wife. There only need to be a few...slipups. You get to give birth, I get an heir; everyone's happy."

"Then make one yourself," Maomao growled.

"I would, but for the life of me I simply can't find the ideal partner."

Lahan's "ideal partner" was probably just the female version of Jinshi, the one who would bring the nation to its knees. Such women didn't grow on trees, after all.

"It truly is a waste, that he should be the Emperor's younger brother. To think—even with that scar on his cheek, still no one excels him in beauty."

"Why not just cut off *your* most prized possession and get a womb transplant? Get some seed planted in *you*?"

"Can you do that?" It was frightening, how earnestly Lahan asked that. When Maomao replied that no, you could not, he looked down at the ground, actually a little disappointed. So he was straight, but evidently had no issue with sex changes. Maomao didn't grasp his standards.

So Jinshi might be out of the question—but if someone had Jinshi's child, the offspring might look like him. Perhaps that was what Lahan was thinking. Perhaps he hoped that with Maomao, who had such an average face, as the mother, Jinshi's features might remain the more prominent—and now he was

trying to come up with an excuse to engineer the liaison. An heir, indeed. They both knew what would become of the child if it were a girl.

"I promise to take care of it and raise it for my entire life," Lahan said. Meaning, bring her up until he could make her his bride. He was certainly taking the long view, if nothing else.

Maomao might have marked him as a pedophile at that moment, but perhaps it simply demonstrated the depth of his devotion to Jinshi's beauty. She didn't doubt his faith that a woman who inherited even a fraction of Jinshi's looks would be among the most beautiful who ever lived. She also didn't doubt that Lahan was completely hopeless, totally worthless, and that if anyone ever asked her if she knew any nice men, he was the one person she would never, ever introduce to them. Ever.

"Anyway, give it a whirl!" he said, looking at her with eyes full of hope. Maomao drank the last of her tea and left the bower, making sure to step on Lahan's toes as she went.

When she got back to her room, a tailor was there. Had Lahan arranged for him to come? He already had some robes ready for her, and wanted to check the fit. The pattern and decorations were a bit different from what Maomao was used to; it had a skirt that almost looked like it belonged on a western dress.

"Now, miss, if you'd be so kind as to change for me."

The tailor, who was wearing bright-red rouge, put her through a wide variety of outfits. If Lahan was behind this, he was being uncommonly generous. Maomao spent the next hour being treated like a dress-up doll.

When the tailor had at last headed home, Maomao finally laid down on the bed. Only then did she notice something sitting on the table: a paulownia-wood box of excellent quality.

I guess I'm supposed to wear whatever's in there. Maybe it was a sash clip for the belt of her robe, she thought, but when she opened it she discovered a silver hair stick. For just a moment, she thought that somehow the silver hair stick she had never expected to see again had managed to return to her.

It was a lovely piece, carved with an image of the moon and flowers—and poppies. Lovely, yes, but Maomao grinned as she realized what the poppies meant. She went ahead and put the stick in her hair, just because. Strangely, it

felt rather fitting, and the way she continued to wear the accessory thereafter was perhaps rather unlike her.

That night was the banquet in the great hall. All the important personages, including the others who had come from the capital, were there. Great men who had looked upon Jinshi either with lust or disdain back when he had supposedly been a eunuch now stumbled over themselves to pour his drink. Maomao had to fight to suppress a chuckle.

Maomao sat down a half step behind Lahan, who was already seated. Men and women didn't ordinarily sit together, but Maomao was being treated as a guest. Elsewhere in the room Jinshi was seated with Gyokuen, and diagonally across from them was a middle-aged man of medium build.

"He's—well, you can see it," Lahan said. Despite his ambiguous choice of words, Maomao knew exactly what he meant. Uryuu, Lishu's father. One could certainly say he looked like the consort—but then again, one could say he didn't. Just for good measure, she looked again at Lahan. He understood very well what she meant, but he gave the only appropriate answer: "Whom exactly am I supposed to be comparing?"

He was right; the matter of Consort Lishu shouldn't be made too public. Maomao had been careless, but then, the fact that Lahan immediately guessed what was on her mind suggested rumors were swirling at the court.

Moreover, because she was outside the rear palace by special dispensation, Lishu covered her face with a veil any time she was in the presence of a man. It wasn't exactly forbidden for her to show her face, but she was probably trying to avoid doing so as much as possible. Nor was she present at this dinner. Instead, a young woman sat beside Uryuu. She kept stealing glances at Jinshi. From the cut of her robe and the way she hid her mouth with her folding fan, Maomao realized it was the half-sister who'd slapped Lishu.

The half-sister tugged on her father's sleeve and said something to him, after which Uryuu, in a sort of anything-for-my-dear-daughter way, turned to Jinshi and started chatting, clearly in hopes of introducing his little girl.

Maomao let the scene sink in. The half-sister obviously had a rather pedestrian obsession with looks. Frankly, the entire arrangement, with the men and women all mixed together, struck Maomao as odd. Her own qualifications for being present among all these big shots consisted of nothing

more than being related to Lahan, and she wondered whether it was really acceptable for her to be there at all. Maybe that was the point.

Plenty of the other men present seemed to be thinking the same way as Uryuu; they were visibly itching for their chance to introduce Jinshi to their daughters. Gyokuen's daughter was already an empress, which meant the master of the house could afford to look quite placid about the matter. Indeed, he seemed to be enjoying watching how Jinshi responded to the situation. Yes, he truly was Empress Gyokuyou's father.

Even the serving women blushed when they noticed Jinshi's looks, but it wasn't enough to make them forget their jobs. They were always alert that no cup should ever go empty. Whenever a plate had been cleared, the next dish would come out, but sadly, the high officials didn't do all that much eating. Uryuu, for example: he nibbled on a bit of rice and some lamb on the bone, but he refused everything else except alcohol.

Lahan appeared quite fond of the fish; it seemed to be all he was eating. That seemed to somewhat reassure the chefs.

Maomao tried a bit of the fish too. It was white fish, pickled and salted—that was presumably how they had managed to preserve it here. It smelled a little funny, but it was probably just fermented, not rotten. As someone who was used to being able to get fresh fish in the capital, Maomao felt it left something to be desired, but Lahan, at least, seemed to find the smelly fish preferable to the lamb meat.

Maomao, quite unbothered by any of it, ate her fill. The daughters of the various officials constrained themselves to delicate sips of juice lest the rouge on their lips smudge, but Maomao didn't care what they did. The finery she'd been dressed in apparently passed muster, but if she'd been wearing her usual clothes, they would have chased her out for a filthy scullery maid. More than one father approached "Sir Lahan" to ask who his "honored younger sister" was, but when they found the young woman greeted them with chicken soup all over her face, they would smile ruefully and excuse themselves. No doubt the rumors would soon start that Maomao's family were *all* eccentrics.

Nothing too unfamiliar was offered for dinner, but unlike a typical meal at court, here people served themselves from large communal dishes. If there was going to be poison in anything, it would have to be something put in directly by the servers.

I wonder how exactly this meal is going to look.

She knew about banquets, but the exotic clothing suggested it was going to be different from any banquet Maomao knew. Her old man had told her that banquets in the west were less about food and more about enjoying dancing, but she didn't quite follow. And it was going to be difficult checking for poison in a situation she could barely picture to begin with.

For one thing, when you never knew who was going to eat from a given dish, you'd have to keep a close eye on the attendants serving out the food. And without knowing the exact ingredients involved, it would be all too easy to mistake a seasoning for a poisonous herb. Thus Maomao tried to take note of the flavors and appearances of the foods as she ate.

Normally, rule number one at a formal banquet like this was to eat as little as possible—but, with all apologies to Empress Gyokuyou's father, that was simply not something Maomao could do.

As she went along with her eating, someone set a cup of wine down by her. Thinking it was some diligent server at work, she looked up, to discover the cup came from the man sitting next to her. It appeared he didn't mind being poured alcohol by the servers, but wasn't going to drink it himself. So it was the pretty-boy who was so thoughtful.

"Thank you very much, Master Rikuson," Maomao said.

"You needn't use any special titles with me, Miss Maomao." The *Miss* was enough to bring a pronounced scowl to Maomao's face. But it would have been just as irritating to be outright corrected, and this seemed to be his little nudge. She could just never tell how to talk to this guy.

"Rikuson, then." She felt funny about it, but she would do anything to keep him from calling her "young lady" again.

Rikuson, seemingly mollified, smiled. "In that case, Maomao. I'm not particularly good at holding my alcohol, so I'd be happy if you would drink it in my place."

Well, with an invitation like that, how could she refuse?

And we have to be sure there isn't anything wrong with the wine.

She brought the cup to her lips. It was grape wine, not terribly alcoholic. She took a sip of water to cleanse her palate, then made for her next helping of food. The servers were decidedly not prioritizing Maomao, so she had to help herself. But, again, this mingling of men and women was strange; most people expected a woman like Maomao to remain quietly in the background.

"Is this the one you wanted?"

"Yes, thank you."

It was Rikuson who reached out and got the dish Maomao had wanted. It looked like he wasn't assigned to that eccentric strategist for nothing—his decent streak must have helped him survive his service. Rikuson started waving down the servers periodically, saying that he wanted this or was out of that. At first it just looked like he was really putting them through their paces, but then she saw him taking in their faces and bodies.

He's committing them to memory, she thought. All the more reason for Maomao not to struggle to remember the servants' faces. She could let him worry about that, while she learned about the food.

"That's a beautiful hair stick you have," Rikuson said.

"You think so?"

So he knew how to make polite conversation too. Maomao remembered she was still wearing the hair stick from the paulownia-wood box. It wasn't flamboyant, but even the untutored eye could tell that it was of fine make. Maomao had thought she'd detected the more well-bred young ladies in the room occasionally glancing at her hair, and now she understood why.

I can sell it later, she thought.

At almost the same moment, there was a crash of shattering tableware. She looked in the direction of the sound to discover a terrified serving woman and Uryuu with his hand in the air. "I told you, I don't want it!" Uryuu was shouting.

"I... I'm sorry..." The woman began cleaning up the pieces of the dish, still obviously terrified. It had apparently bounced on the floor and smashed against the wall; the contents had scattered everywhere.

What a waste. Maomao did understand: the cooks had gone to all that trouble to prepare the fish, and the server probably wanted to be sure it got eaten. But even so, it had been a little forward of her.

The others in the room looked shocked. Uryuu, realizing the commotion he had caused, endeavored to look calm again. "Gracious, look at me. I'm terribly sorry," he said, turning a smile on the room, but that didn't put the food back in the dish. One heard rather unfavorable rumors about Uryuu—but even at that, his reaction here seemed distinctly short-tempered.

Gyokuen stroked his beard and whispered to another server. Presumably instructing that the errant woman be disciplined, or even fired. One could only hope that mercy was one of the things in which he resembled his

daughter.

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Chapter 15: The Banquet (Part One)

Diplomacy was a lot of trouble: for example, you went somewhere that took more than twenty days each way to reach, only to stay there for just five days. During those five days, there was no end of meeting, greeting, and eating, such that the important people were constantly busy; whereas Maomao had no such job to do. She couldn't exactly go sightseeing, though, so she was just thinking that maybe she would go study the plants in the garden when a knock came at her door.

Who the hell is that?

She opened the door to discover a woman standing there smiling. Maomao didn't know her name, but she knew who she was: Consort Lishu's half-sister. The requisite entourage flanked her on both sides.

"May I help you, ma'am?" Maomao asked politely, but she thought, *Consort Lishu's room is next door—get it straight!* She was at least adult enough to keep that thought to herself.

The half-sister looked at Maomao, and then very deliberately laughed, "Pfft!" One might ask what had inspired such an infuriatingly condescending laugh, but it seemed to represent the woman's overall assessment of Maomao.

"I simply thought I might introduce myself," the other woman said. "As fellow members of named clans, I imagine we might be seeing each other again in the future."

Maomao felt a scowl cross her face at the mention of named clans. She hated being treated like a member of the family, even if it was just this once.

The half-sister, meanwhile, was glancing at Maomao's head. "That was a truly gorgeous hair stick you were wearing last night," she said.

"Do you think so? Unfortunately, I'm not particularly attuned to the value of objects."

That's where her attention was? These princess types were awfully quick-eyed. Maomao realized that if she were to sell the hair stick, it would soon be traced back to her.

“I’m so terribly excited to discover what you’ll wear to tonight’s banquet,” the half-sister said, and then with a flourish she hid her mouth behind a peacock-feather folding fan and walked away.

This hadn’t been about introduction so much as about observation, Maomao thought. She was one of only a few young women to have accompanied the westward expedition—although judging by dinner the night before, most of those who *were* present were hoping to insinuate themselves with Jinshi.

Watching the way the woman’s hips swayed as she walked, Maomao concluded that this half-sister did not much resemble Consort Lishu. If she had, perhaps Lishu would have wondered less about her parentage. Still, if the Emperor really was Lishu’s father, Maomao couldn’t help wondering if he wouldn’t have found a better way to use her. It might be malicious of her, but she thought there were probably better uses to which Lishu could be put.

Now then, having been mocked first thing in the morning, Maomao headed for the garden in hopes of making herself feel better. A garden, fed by the all-important oasis, was a show of power in this parched land. But Maomao suspected it wasn’t entirely frivolous—Empress Gyokuyou’s father didn’t seem like the kind of man to indulge in luxury purely for its own sake. A lesson he had passed on to his daughter, Maomao realized, when she considered the number and quality of serving women there had been at the Jade Pavilion.

And what was there in the garden? In one corner grew a strange plant, like nothing Maomao had ever seen. It couldn’t be said to have leaves or stems. When she inspected it, eyes wide, she found it had a sort of wax on the surface, like a candle, and that it was covered in narrow thorns. It looked similar to aloe, but fan-shaped. Most intrigued, Maomao reached out to touch it.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Those thorns aren’t easy to get out if they stick you,” someone said. The voice wasn’t obviously masculine or feminine, and when Maomao looked toward it, she saw a lovely person in men’s clothing crouching down and inspecting the unusual plant. It was Suirei. She was attended by a young man. He looked like a servant at first glance, but Maomao knew he was a minder. It was strange she had even been allowed to come here; evidently the minding wasn’t very strict.

Suirei was an apothecary like Maomao. They thought in similar ways, and

neither of them could help wanting to learn more about any unusual plants or flowers they might come across.

“All right, so what is it, and how do you use it?” Maomao asked.

“I gather it’s called a cactus. It was discovered far to the west, and brought here as an experiment, because it’s supposed to be quite hardy in dry climates. The fruit and stems are edible.”

Maomao nodded, impressed. Suirei had obviously devoted herself to this plant, perhaps ever since she’d arrived here. She had a notebook in hand and was sketching the cactus diligently.

“Can any part of it be used medicinally?” Maomao asked.

“That, I’m not sure about. Considering the resemblance to aloe, I’d expect it has some uses. They have some of that growing nearby.”

Her attendant took in their conversation silently; he was probably committing every word to memory, and would report on it to his superiors later.

Not that we’re saying anything incriminating. They were just talking about medicine.

“If they have aloe here, maybe I could get them to give me some.”

“Out of burn medication?” Suirei asked.

“No, the constant diet of portable rations has left my digestion somewhat irregular.”

“Ah. I see.”

Suirei might look like a pretty young man, but in fact she was a woman, roughly Maomao’s age. She would understand the situation with a woman’s “belly.” Because it was the health aspects that were interesting to her, she didn’t go getting needlessly embarrassed over things, and that made her easy to talk to. In that way, she and Maomao were much alike.

“In that case, perhaps I should make sure Consort Lishu takes some as well,” Suirei said.

Maomao made a sound of agreement. It was true: if even Maomao was feeling the effects of their diet, the sheltered princess was probably suffering. She was so thoughtful about others that she often even refrained from using the toilet when she needed to. At least her health was being more or less looked after, thanks to Ah-Duo’s always being with her.

“In terms of ingredients you can find around here, it might be good mixed with yogurt,” Suirei said. The fermented milk product certainly did help keep things regular.

“Er, I’m not so sure that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

Because there were so many foods Lishu couldn’t eat. White fish could give her a rash, and she didn’t cope well with honey. If they gave her something she wasn’t used to, so far from making her movements better, it might well make things worse. Maomao had spotted Lishu mostly avoiding unfamiliar foods at dinner the night they’d come to the mansion.

A furrow formed in Suirei’s brow as she listened to Maomao. Maomao knew perfectly well how much trouble this all was. If Lishu had been born a commoner, she probably wouldn’t have made it past seven years old. Still, she’d done well to endure the long journey; maybe she deserved a kind word and a pat on the head. But no—that wasn’t in Maomao’s character.

Maomao had a notebook and writing utensil ready to go, much like Suirei’s. Suirei was making meticulous drawings of everything that hadn’t shown up in the encyclopedias. Maomao joined her, and for a while the two of them worked in silence. Suirei’s attendant never yawned, but only watched them with an inscrutable smile.

I actually wish the little shit were here right now, Maomao thought, by which she meant Chou-u. He was a talented artist, that much was for sure, but Maomao was convinced that drawing pictures was never going to make anyone a living. Everyone was willing to buy his portraits now because a kid who was such a good artist so young was such a novel thing. They would grow tired of him soon enough.

Maybe we could get him to do erotic pictures? They had plenty of models.

Maomao’s rather filthy thought was interrupted by what sounded like a distant roar. “What do you suppose that was?” she asked. It had sounded like some kind of wild animal, and it raised goosebumps on her skin. The birds, startled, fluttered out of the trees.

“The delegation from the west has apparently promised a most interesting gift. They once brought a creature called an elephant.” The explanation came from none other than the minder.

“An elephant?” Maomao asked. She’d seen them in picture scrolls. They were huge animals with long noses. She’d seen carved elephant tusks before, but never the living thing. Allegedly one had been offered to the empress regnant, but that had been before Maomao had been born.

“Was that an elephant that we heard just now?”

“No—perhaps a tiger.” It seemed the man didn’t know.

To bring a living tiger, though—Maomao had encountered tigers only in the form of pelts and medicines. They made rugs with beautiful patterns, and there was an aphrodisiac (a very effective one, as Maomao recalled) to be made from the animal's sex organs. How effective was it? Let's just say that the next morning, even Pairin had been satisfied. The medicine had enabled her partner to last just that long.

"I suspect we might see the animal at tonight's banquet."

"That sounds very interesting," Maomao said, and it wasn't just politeness; she meant it. Music and dances weren't of much interest to her, but a living animal—now, that was intriguing. She felt her heart beat a little faster, and she doodled a tiger in her notebook. The minder watched her, smiling.

"The servants have prepared cactus juice," he said. "Would you like to try some?"

Well! No reason why not.

Time passed as Maomao drank juice and chatted with Suirei, and then it was afternoon. During their talk, Maomao sometimes found herself thinking about Shisui. The two half-sisters seemed to have gotten along well, notwithstanding the antagonism between their mothers. Or at the very least, Shisui had seemed to have a soft spot for Suirei. Even as her clan was destroyed around her, she'd worked to save the children—and her older sister.

No, no, that was far enough down memory lane. Get too lost in the past and you might not find your way out.

When Maomao got back to her room, she found some people waiting whom she presumed had been sent by Lahan. They had new accessories and re-tailored clothing. A woman in ostentatious makeup took one look at the plain, unadorned Maomao and grinned openly. Maomao took a step backward.

It was, as always, exhausting getting prettied up.

The banquet was absolutely packed full of important-looking people. Per western custom, they ate standing up; a variety of dishes was laid out on a table, and you went along with a plate and took whatever you wanted.

It's practically an invitation to poison everything in sight.

It was, quite honestly, all rather new to Maomao—but that also made things a little easier in its own way.

One thing that struck her was how it seemed to be the custom here for men and women to appear as pairs. Often, a man would bring his wife or girlfriend, but if he didn't have one, he might well be accompanied by a sister or other female relative. Lahan had been planning to introduce Maomao to everyone as his "little sister," but after a good crushing of his toes he'd decided to stick to simply calling her a "relative."

As easy as it would have been to poison any given dish at this banquet, it would also have been difficult. There was no way to know who was going to eat from what dish, so it would be hard to target any given person for assassination. Of course, if you were more into indiscriminate murder, it would be another matter.

And one final observation: this didn't actually make Maomao's job as food taster that much harder. She simply had to follow her charge around, taking samples of his meal. The only complication was that this was a little, well, obvious—but Lahan had a plan for that too. He said that Maomao was fifteen (politely shaving a few years off her age) and going through a growth spurt. Maomao, never letting her expression change, crushed his remaining toes.

In short, one could choose to eat or not—and Maomao wished they would simply choose not to. But that wouldn't be very fun for the guests.

"Wonder if something will really happen," Maomao said.

"It's just a precaution."

"Hmm." Maomao looked faintly amused, but also not at all interested.

"Well," Lahan said, eyeing her. "They say clothes make the man, but apparently the same doesn't go for women. At least some of them."

"Shut up."

Maomao was dragging a heavy skirt behind her. The outfit, like the meal, was western-style, more or less. Not exactly the same—it hadn't been possible to get something like that ready—but the silhouette, the overall look, was similar, including the bone hoop that went around her waist to puff out the skirt. It was also the style with western dresses to squeeze the waist and show the top half of the cleavage for emphasis—but sadly, Maomao didn't have much to show off, and lest she embarrass herself, she instead wore a long-sleeved top, submitting only to having her waist cinched about with a

belt.

They did her hair too, somewhat; it was put up in a rather showy manner, but ultimately the stylists were limited by the material. It was better than it had been, perhaps, but it suffered by the truly resplendent comparisons present at the banquet. She looked like a stalk of shepherd's purse among a field of roses and peonies. Just one thing helped calm her in this otherwise unfamiliar and unsuitable ensemble: a fine silver hair stick.

"I wouldn't worry too much. You qualify as a dandelion at least."

Maomao couldn't understand how her cousin could read her mind like that, at least at moments like this. She didn't say anything, but gave him a glare before they headed into the banquet hall.

Her first thought was, *That is some ceiling.* The room was already very large, but the ceiling was far above their heads. Even in the capital one rarely saw a building with such a sense of space.

Part of the ceiling was open, and woven banners, a craft unique to this region, hung down from it. The room had a dirt floor, but it was covered with a low-pile carpet, probably also something unique to these parts. It was a shame to get dirt on it.

They were in a palace not far from Gyokuen's mansion; the place had been constructed by the clan once known as the Yi, and they had built it to the hilt of luxury. Perhaps that hinted at the reason why, decades before, they had been stripped of their clan name and destroyed. They had done something to arouse the anger of the empress regnant. The stories about her were truly fearsome, Maomao reflected. The present Emperor must have had it rough with her for a grandmother.

There was already a substantial number of guests in the banquet hall. There were plenty of important men, along with gaudily dressed young ladies that Maomao took to be their daughters. Their eyes were all shining—or perhaps *glinting* would be a better word. The big favorite—that is to say, Jinshi—hadn't arrived yet.

Consort Lishu had, however. She was quite conspicuous, since she was still wearing the veil to conceal her face. To be so obvious and yet so removed from the moment implied that she hadn't yet done what she'd come here for. Maomao looked over to see who her companion was, and saw Ah-Duo still standing next to her, dressed in her usual men's garb.

Hmm...

Ah-Duo looked so convincing in the man's outfit that Maomao suspected very few people in the room would guess that she was a woman, let alone a former consort of the reigning Emperor. What's more, people seemed to be taking them not for father and daughter, but for brother and sister. Women were coming over to talk to them. Not without reason, Maomao thought, had Ah-Duo been the "idol" of the ladies of the rear palace for so many years.

Lahan, of course, knew well enough to greet the two of them, and Maomao also offered a polite hello.

"My, my. I thought you must be someone's fine young daughter," said Ah-Duo.

"You jest, milady," Maomao replied, but she wasn't surprised to discover that Ah-Duo was far better at polite flattery than Lahan. Consort Lishu, meanwhile, owing to Lahan's presence, remained hidden behind Ah-Duo. Her dress was appropriate for a young woman of her age, neither too showy nor too restrained, and the colors matched Ah-Duo's outfit. Perhaps they'd picked their outfits together.

Lishu's perfume, though—it wasn't her usual stuff. Maybe it was a way of keeping herself from becoming intoxicated by the atmosphere of the place. Maomao would have liked to talk to them a little longer, but they no doubt had things to do. Besides, Lahan was here to build his relations with the people from the west, not chat with consorts from his own court.

There was much black hair to be seen, but also gold, brown, and even red locks here and there. Eyes tended to be bright colors, and the body types were different from what Maomao was used to.. Sei-i-shuu was said to have much mingling of blood with the west, but many of these people were more likely emissaries who had come from the west proper. Lahan was soon approached by a man and woman with reddish-brown hair.

I can't understand a word they're saying, thought Maomao. She knew a smattering of one of the western languages, but not enough to actually speak it. Besides, the western reaches were home to a variety of tongues, and the one she knew was from farther west than where they were now.

Lahan soldiered gamely on, conversing one halting word at a time. Eccentric he might be, but he wasn't without his talents. The man and woman greeted Maomao and said something else politely, then departed.

"Can I go ahead and get something to eat?" Maomao asked. It seemed to be about the only thing she could do at the moment. That, and keep up the

polite smile she'd mastered in the pleasure quarter.

"Go ahead. I didn't bring you here to meet and greet, anyway. Don't drink too much."

She'd been distinctly intrigued by the tray of alcohol one of the servers was carrying around, but Lahan had warned her again before they'd come in not to get drunk. Although Maomao wasn't sure how much trouble she could really get into with the mild, juice-based alcohol.

"I wouldn't get *drunk*."

"I heard you emptied a barrel on the way here."

Who'd snitched on her? It had to be Jinshi or Basen. Maomao clicked her tongue.

True, you couldn't be too careful—but was it really possible that the infamous White Lady was somehow involved here? Maomao had brought some medicines along that she thought might prove useful if anything should happen, but she had no idea if they would really help.

Lahan, meanwhile, was in his element. Behind his spectacles, his fox-like eyes were glittering. The mixed blood of the people of Shaoh produced a great many striking beauties. According to Lahan (the cad), it was the numbers that made up a woman that were beautiful. So a woman wasn't beautiful as such, but the numbers that "made her up" were? It didn't make much sense to Maomao, but apparently the eccentric strategist's nephew was more than a little eccentric himself. She suspected he saw a world that was invisible to her.

But then there was the moment when, stroking his chin, he said, "Look at *her*. The Imperial younger brother is prettier than that." The words seemed to leave his mouth so easily. That was when Maomao was sure he didn't know the first thing about how women thought.

Lahan glanced at Maomao, and from his appraising look she gathered that whatever numbers made *her* up were not appealing to him. "With enough work, you might be able to bear a *next* generation that's beautiful, at least..."

What was he trying to say? And could anyone blame Maomao for crushing his toes underfoot?

Wincing, Lahan passed Maomao some juice—nonalcoholic. She followed him around, looking annoyed.

They're all so big, she thought. The mixed bloodlines must foster improved height. Partly, the westerners were all on the tall side, but the

joining of different bloodlines seemed almost by definition to produce people who were larger than their parents. Maomao couldn't speak for people, but when you bred plants with closely related species, you supposedly got larger individuals from the seeds.

She was lost in thinking about how she'd like to try that in her field back home if she ever got the chance—when she suddenly realized that a wall had formed around her. A wall made of one woman and two men. One of the men appeared to be an interpreter, but the other looked like a servant rather than a master. The woman, her dress emphasizing her chest as was the custom, seemed to be the most important of the three of them. She was beautiful, with bright-colored hair and sky-blue eyes. She was tall to begin with, and she'd augmented her height with high-heeled shoes.

Maomao didn't say anything, but caught Lahan's gaze.

Didn't he say something about forging bonds with western merchants? The woman certainly didn't look like a merchant. More notably, Maomao remembered her. Her golden hair and almost translucently pale skin. And the blue hair ornament she was wearing. She was one of the special emissaries who'd visited the capital the year before—they'd distinguished themselves by having one of them wear a red and the other a blue hair ornament. If they were still abiding by the same color scheme, this was the calmer and more mature of the two women.

"I'd love to talk more with you," she was saying. She wore a scintillating smile, but it frightened Maomao. She could sense something lurking behind it. And yet at that moment, it seemed less sinister than it reminded her of...

Consort Gyokuyou. It's the same sort of smile as Consort Gyokuyou's. It smelled not of business, but of politics. Was this what they were really here for? *Western merchants, my ass*, Maomao thought as she picked up her skirt and followed Lahan.

Ayla—was that her name? Maomao tried to remember; she'd heard it once. It was, in its own way, laudable that she remembered it at all, considering how she tended to forget anything she wasn't specifically interested in. Ayla was the other emissary, the one who, it appeared, had been selling feifa to the Shi clan just before the rebellion the previous year. This woman before them had some nerve, walking right up to them after her partner had pulled something like that.

The Yi clan palace had been built in imitation of the western architectural style, up to and including this banquet hall. It was a large, open space flanked by a number of rooms where guests could relax by themselves—or hold private conversations unobserved. And private conversations usually meant something was going on.

A girl with skin the color of barley danced to the music of an instrument Maomao had never heard before. Nobody would notice if a few people slipped away from the crowd—and if anyone did, it would have been rude to ask after them, anyway.

Why would she come to Lahan, though? The small, tousle-haired man looked almost comically mismatched with the tall, golden-locked beauty. The presence of third parties—Maomao and the others—would nix any idea that the two of them might be off to a secret tryst.

Maybe that's why she chose him. The woman had come to the capital as an emissary, but it seemed marriage had been on her mind as well—and Maomao had been involved herself in undermining those prospects. The thought made her a little uneasy: she worried that the woman might still recognize the "moon spirit," even if he was now dressed in men's clothing and bore a wound on his cheek. Still, even if she noticed Jinshi, she probably wouldn't be able to say anything about it publicly.

Black tea was poured into a delicate porcelain cup. The table had cabriole legs, as did the chairs, and an elaborate chandelier hung from the ceiling.

"Tastes around here seem to lean quite...western, don't they?" Lahan said. The remark might have sounded disparaging, except that it was completely true. Lahan was in good spirits, in light of his lovely companion; but in his head he was no doubt judging how she stacked up against Jinshi.

"That's true," the woman replied. "Although some of the furnishings could be considered behind the times." The place was neatly maintained and the furniture was in good condition, but most of it seemed to have been inherited from the previous owners, and more than enough time had passed for it to have gone out of style.

The walls of the room were thick—thick enough to discourage any eavesdroppers. The interpreter withdrew so that it was just the four of them, two seated on each side.

"I'm honored that you should have chosen me to speak to. I could certainly wish to talk to you alone, just the two of us..." Lahan hardly looked

like more than the male version of Maomao; she had no idea where he found the gall to talk like that.

"That depends on what you wanted to talk about...Master Ra-han." The woman spoke fluently, but couldn't quite seem to get her tongue around Lahan's name. Well, it wasn't an easy one. Maybe that also explained why Lahan avoided ornate or circuitous expressions—it had to make him more understandable. Maomao followed their conversation easily; the woman's servant wore a look of grim concentration, manfully trying to understand what was being said.

"I believe you expressed an interest in products from regions farther west," the woman said.

"Yes. I would be surprised if anyone *wasn't* interested in such things."

He's got to repay the debt. They were coming up on a year since Lahan's adoptive father had made a very expensive purchase at the brothel. Maomao's understanding was that half the amount had been paid off, but the other half remained to be redeemed, with the house as collateral. Knowing the old madam, the moment the time was up, she would be at their door with her enforcers. She would probably start auctioning off the furnishings right there.

"Heh heh! Then I think we'll get along very well together." The woman took out a piece of carefully tanned parchment covered with characters that Maomao took to be numbers. Lahan's smile broadened.

"A most interesting proposition, but will we both profit from this?" he said. "The price certainly gets no objections from me, but this is the first time anyone's ever come to me with such a prospect. I confess, I can't help thinking that if we have to bring the grain to you, it'll be difficult to remain in the black."

"Yes, perhaps. But I assure you, I didn't embark on this venture without forethought. If we use the sea routes, we'll be able to transport large quantities—and more importantly, the value of grain and rice will go up in my country."

Now the woman took out a map.

Geez, the moment I think they're going to talk about politics...

It really was about money. Well, okay, so Maomao got the sense that it might have something to do with politics, too, but she couldn't really be sure. Quite frankly, she didn't care. She just sat there, thinking about different

ways to use cactus and looking like she might break into a yawn at any moment.

Until, that was, she suddenly heard something she couldn't ignore. It was the woman saying, "Very soon, insects will bring catastrophe upon my country. The 'northern catastrophe.'"

Maomao, startled, nearly slapped the table, only just managing to stop her hand before she struck the surface. But the movement was plenty to give away her interest in the subject.

The north: north of Shaoh was Hokuaren. Maomao was stunned to realize that the same thing so preoccupying Jinshi and his cohort should come up here at this moment. The woman, the former emissary, seemed to grin at her. And then she said: "If this proposition doesn't work out, I have a favor to ask of you." Her brow tensed. "Will you help us flee our country?"

Problems tend to accumulate, Maomao realized again. Oh, how they do pile up.

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Chapter 16: The Banquet (Part Two)

"Well, well, what to do?"

Lahan sounded downright giddy as he slid his glasses up the bridge of his nose, thinking furiously. For him, the emissary's request for political asylum was probably less interesting to consider than how best to make the business negotiations pay off. Business meant the flow of money, the flow of goods; it was a world drenched in numbers, and that had to be engaging for him.

"I think you can answer that question better than I can."

"Whatever we do or don't do, wasn't it a fascinating conversation? Oh. Ahem, yes, of course I'll at least have a talk. I assume that's her objective."

He made it sound so simple, Maomao thought. Insects "bringing catastrophe" had to refer to a plague; of that she was sure. Rising grain prices meant there was a threat of famine. The emissary they'd spoken to was from Shaoh. But then there was the woman Ayla, who'd been conspiring with the Shi clan. Evidently, Shaoh was not monolithic. Even so, a request for political asylum was beyond anything Maomao had expected.

Maomao didn't like to spend her time worrying about other people's problems. And the problems of entire nations? Count her out! So why, why did she keep finding herself drawn into things like this? They could have brought Lahan along and left it at that.

I wonder if she recognized me, Maomao thought. She wondered whether the emissary realized it wasn't the first time they'd met. The light had been fading the last time, but they had seen each other face-to-face. Even if the woman did remember her, though, surely there must have been another way to go about things. *Maybe she just wanted to be able to show* some *kind of connection to us.*

If so, then maybe Maomao talking about it would have been a part of her calculations. A way of putting a check on something else. Maomao wasn't one for gossip and games, though. She was more keen to see what was going on in the banquet hall. Why would you go off and have a secret conversation when you thought there might be suspicious characters lurking about?

When they got back, they found that the eating and chatter had ceased entirely, and something new was going on.

"Is this also a western custom?" Maomao asked.

There was music playing, and men and women were facing each other and dancing along to it. Well, if you could call it dancing—it wasn't a performance like a proper troupe might put on; more just spinning around the room in time with the rhythm of the music. This, evidently, was why the men and women had been requested to come in pairs.

I'd trip over someone's feet before I knew it, Maomao thought, confident that this was one thing she absolutely did not want to do. She looked at Lahan.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm hopeless at this, myself."

Thank goodness they had that in common, at least.

As they looked around, they spotted a crowd that had formed—and who should be in the middle of it but a very familiar, very beautiful man. Jinshi was mobbed, and was flashing the heavenly smile Maomao had already seen her fill of back when he was supposedly a eunuch. Basen was beside him, but frowning.

Poor choice of sidekick. Basen was never going to be much help here; he flinched back visibly from every young woman who approached. *With his strength, he's probably so nervous right now that he couldn't dance even if they got him out there.*

Maomao rubbed her wrist where he'd grabbed her the day before. There were still faint red marks on it. What she wanted to know was, if the men and women were supposed to pair off, what were those two doing standing there by themselves?

"I believe Lady Ah-Duo pulled a little prank. If she were to pose as a man, that would be too many of them, no?"

"Ah, I see."

If Jinshi were to accompany Consort Lishu, then Basen (who, as a member of a named clan, had the status) could accompany Ah-Duo, even if he might feel a little funny about it. But, with all due respect to Jinshi and Basen, knowing Lishu, it would be much better for her if Ah-Duo acted as her escort. There was no telling what that scheming half-sister might try—Maomao wouldn't put it past her to at least slip a scorpion into the consort's bed.

That reminds me, I wonder if I can get some of the grilled scorpions to go. Supposedly, scorpions were also sometimes served still alive and kicking, but she didn't hold out much hope of sampling that particular dish either here or at Gyokuen's mansion. She made herself a mental note to be sure she got a chance before they went home. Much to Maomao's disappointment, they hadn't run into any scorpions or other poisonous insects on the road—Suirei had been too scrupulous about the bug repellant. Maomao felt that surely they should have seen at least *one* such creature on the way.

Lahan had a hand to his chin and was continually muttering to himself, calculating.

"Looks like you had quite an interesting conversation," someone said politely. Maomao looked up to discover Rikuson, a gentle smile on his face. He had a glass in one hand, which he handed to Maomao. She gave it an experimental sniff and detected the faint whiff of alcohol.

"Thank you," she said and drank it down, assuming that one glass wouldn't hurt. It was carbonated fruit wine that popped as it went down; it tasted so good she could have stuck out her tongue with pleasure. She could feel the bubbles still fizzing in her mouth. "That's quite tasty."

"Yes, one of the western merchants brought it. I hear it's quite precious, and that was the last glass." Rikuson grinned. Suddenly, Maomao had a bad feeling about this. "For the record, I didn't drink any," Rikuson said.

Then she felt him grasp her wrist. She was startled by the suddenness of it, but unlike Basen, his grip was gentle. She found herself pulled toward where everyone was spinning around.

"Perhaps you'd be so kind as to join me for one dance?" His expression seemed to change from gentle to shrewd.

Hey! He is *that freak's subordinate!* Maomao, not quite able to hide what was going through her mind, gave him a very severe look, but Rikuson only smiled. He looked like he was trying to keep from laughing out loud. "I see that what I heard was true," he said.

"I don't know who you heard it from, but let's hurry up and get this over with."

"Just until the one song is over."

Maomao falteringly imitated what everyone else was doing; she at least found the wherewithal to avoid stepping on her partner's feet. (Although if her partner had been Lahan, his toes would probably have been forfeit by the

end of the song.)

"Do you know why the Emperor's younger brother specifically chose to bring you here?"

"I assume because I'm so useful."

Rikuson placed one of his hands on Maomao's hip and held her hand with the other—she saw that this was the western style, but it would have been unthinkable in the capital. Strange that it felt so ordinary here. Funny, what the right time and place could do. "True enough. But I think you could stand to have a slightly clearer sense of your own value," Rikuson said, carefully maintaining his polite mode of speech. "It demonstrates the power of the La name at court."

"I'm a base apothecary born in the pleasure district," Maomao said bluntly. She didn't know how much Rikuson knew, and she didn't care. As far as she was concerned, this was the truth.

"That's well and good. Just one thing, though." Rikuson smiled again and glanced to the side, in the direction of the crowd. The beautiful man at the center of it was looking directly at them. "Please remember that you aren't a disinterested third party. Never forget the import of what you wear on your head."

Does he mean the hair stick? she thought, but Rikuson was already taking her hand; he brought her fingers slowly to his lips and kissed them. *Come on,* really*?* Maomao thought. It was the same sort of thing that traveling performers jokingly did for the prostitutes.

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The moment the song was over, they went back to standing by the wall. Lahan was still muttering to himself, calculating, and Rikuson disappeared someplace. Maomao felt someone watching her closely from a distance, but chose to ignore it. She lightly brushed her hand where Rikuson had kissed it, then looked around.

She found a young woman sitting right up against the wall; the veil over her face gave away that it was Consort Lishu. There was no one near her. The consort appeared to be looking fixedly at a middle-aged man who was swirling a cup of alcohol and chatting amiably. Lishu's half-sister was with him, smiling broadly, confidently. If her father hadn't doubted her mother's faithfulness, perhaps Lishu would also be grinning and talking. Maybe she wouldn't have become the timid young woman she was today.

"May I ask where Lady Ah-Duo is?" Maomao said, approaching Lishu. But then she involuntarily pressed a hand to her nose, exclaiming, "Oh!" Lishu looked up, shaking a little. Maomao suspected she'd been crying behind the veil. "And may I also ask...what that smell is, milady?"

"Someone bumped into me and their perfume bottle spilled on me," she said.

The billowing, rich fabric of Lishu's dress seemed to have soaked the stuff right up, and now the unusual, very *fragrant* fragrance was all around her. Certain perfumes were made from animal musk, and properly diluted, they could be perfectly fine aromas, but in larger quantities...well, they smelled like excrement.

"Lady Ah-Duo went to prepare a room for me."

"I see." And Consort Lishu, knowing she couldn't mingle smelling like that, was pinned in place. Maomao thought about summoning a server to get something for her, but there didn't seem to be any around. "Who was it who bumped into you?" she asked.

"I think Lady Ah-Duo is looking for them too. She said to sit here and wait."

The table of food was up against the wall; everyone else had already lost interest in the now-cold dinner and was focused on dancing, chatting, or just generally being seen. Maomao took several pieces of meat from the table and put them on a plate. Sure, they were cold, but they still tasted fine. She tucked in, not caring in the least that she was ruining the rouge on her lips. "Want some?" she asked Lishu.

"Yes, please," the consort said hesitantly. She'd eaten one of the local meat dishes at the formal dinner the other day. It might be cold, but for want of anything else to do, Lishu accepted a plate.

The dancing came to an end, and something most unusual was brought into the banquet hall. Several large, strong men hauled a huge square thing covered in a white cloth into the room, pulling it along on a cart.

What's that? Maomao wondered, her eyes widening a little.

With a flourish, the men pulled off the covering to reveal what was inside. A low growling could be heard, and the crowd was confronted with a reddish-brown creature whose presence was only accentuated by its great mane. Even lying down, it was obvious how much bigger it was than any person.

So it wasn't a tiger. The thing wasn't striped. *A lion?*

She'd never seen a live one, only a skin. Unlike the flat, empty pelt, the real animal was overwhelming. Even chained inside a cage of thick bars, its terribleness all but wafted through the air.

The lion—essentially a gigantic cat with a scarf—was looking around angrily.

Yikes, Maomao thought, although she studied the scarf-cat intently. The fur of the pelt had been rougher than that of the average feline, although she wasn't sure about that of the living creature. The tiger, another large cat, had some medicinal uses, and Maomao looked at this new creature hungrily, wondering if it might make any good medicines itself.

Maomao was practically vibrating with interest, but Lishu was quaking with fear. Each time the lion's roar echoed around the room, she would flinch back. It was all too much for the timid consort.

It's not like it's going to eat her. Well, all right—if it got out of that cage, it could very well attack someone, but they seemed to have taken suitable precautions that the lion stayed where it was.

The men who had brought the lion in produced a plate piled with raw meat. The lion reared up, such as it could in its cramped confines, and reached out with one massive foreleg through the bars.

"Would anyone like to try feeding it?" one of the men inquired. The lion had been brought here to be entertainment, and apparently had been starved for the purpose. It was growling, hungry for the meat, drooling as its long tongue emerged from its mouth.

Several interested spectators came forward. One of them skewered some meat on a stick and slowly approached the cage. The lion smacked the meat down with its great paw, causing the man holding the stick to fall on his behind. The crowd murmured.

Each time the lion was given a hunk of meat, it would be moved closer to the crowd to give people a better view. The lion, annoyed at only getting one meager bit of food at a time, began to growl again.

"Shall we move somewhere?" Maomao asked Lishu, who trembled each time the lion got closer. At this rate, Maomao feared she might faint clean away when the lion was right in front of their eyes. Consort Lishu, however, didn't move.

"You'd prefer to stay here and watch?" Maomao asked.

"I can't s-seem to..." the consort began, but her voice was hardly louder than a fly, and Maomao didn't catch the rest of what she was saying.

"What's that?"

"I can't seem to stand up..." Lishu's earlobes, just visible behind her veil, were bright red. Ah, yes, of course. With this consort, she should have guessed. Maomao didn't so much as laugh—she didn't really feel the impulse—but looked around, hoping to find Ah-Duo.

At that moment, the lion on the cart began to growl threateningly. At first Maomao thought it was angry at being fed piecemeal, but no, that wasn't quite it. Its nose was twitching, and it began throwing itself against the bars of the cage. Several strong men pulled on the chains restraining the agitated animal, but that didn't calm it down; in fact, it seemed to make things worse. The lion slammed against its cage again, and then again—and then finally, one of the bars gave way with a crack, breaking apart and giving it enough room to squeeze partially out. Then a second bar snapped, and the lion was free. The broken bars bounced off the animal and rolled along the carpeted floor.

"Hey, somebody stop that thing!" someone shouted, but it was much too late. Even the men holding the chains weren't strong enough to hold the lion as it bounded away. They were dragged forcibly into the bars on the other side of the cage, one man's nose shattering in the process. The rest of the handlers were at least able to hang on, but it did little good; they were simply dragged along, unable to stop the beast.

The entire affair took only a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity to

Maomao. Her father had told her that when humans become intensely afraid, their perception of time slows down. She had just experienced it firsthand. Before she knew what she was doing, she was flinging the packet of medicine that she kept in the folds of her robe.

The lion came running at her. Its wide, bloodshot eyes showed that it was in a heightened state of agitation; it wouldn't be bothered by a little thing like that. Running away would have been the right answer; throwing something at it was a waste of time. And in the time it took Maomao to come to that conclusion, she realized somebody was clinging desperately to her sleeve.

Oh, shit.

It was Lishu, still paralyzed with fear. This could hardly have been worse. Maomao could easily have shaken out of the consort's feeble grip. Perhaps she should have.

The next thing she knew, Maomao was tumbling gracelessly along with Lishu. They ended up under a table. It was probably a useless gesture—one swipe of those mighty paws would take out not only the table leg, but probably Maomao and Lishu as well.

Lishu was looking at the lion, unable to even blink. The veil had come off in the fall, and on her face was an empty expression, as if all she could do was wait for her impending death.

Those terrible claws never came to tear them in two, however.

No one moved except the lion, which lazily raised a foreleg high. But then there was a figure between it and Maomao. Somebody holding a broken iron bar.

Before the lion could bring its paw down, the figure smashed it in the nose with the iron bar. There was no hesitation in the action, only a single-minded attempt to strike a place that was vulnerable on both humans and animals. There was a thump, and the lion's blood flew through the air. It was joined by shards of iron as the bar shattered further.

Again without hesitation, the figure struck out with what was left of the bar, hitting the animal between the eyes. Then the person looked at the shattered bar and said almost nonchalantly, "Well, that didn't last long." It was hard to tell whether he was talking about the iron bar, or the lion, which was thrashing about with the pain of its broken nose.

The voice was one Maomao had become quite familiar with during their travels. She had long been wondering what this man was doing as Jinshi's

attendant. She'd always thought there must be people more suited to the task.

But there you have it.

Her wrist still ached where he'd grabbed her days before—and he presumably hadn't been using his full strength then. He had, after all, managed to break some limbs while apprehending the bandits. As Jinshi had said, he was enough to handle them all on his own. He was right to worry whether women would be afraid of him. Suddenly it all made sense.

Now someone else spoke up, someone with a lovely voice: "Quickly, now's your chance to recapture it!" The lion keepers responded by wrapping the chains around the pillars holding up the building. Then they brought new chains to make sure the lion was completely restrained.

The man who had attacked the lion tossed the useless iron stick away and crouched down, appearing under the table with a wrinkle in his brow. "Are you all right, milady?" Only after that did the man notice Maomao was there too. He frowned openly. Another thing Maomao had been realizing recently was that he did not consider her to be among the women he was charged with protecting.

His expression quickly shifted again, though, thanks to the young woman next to Maomao.

It was Basen who had attacked the lion with nothing more than an iron bar for a weapon. But now he blushed and didn't say anything more. It was more or less his usual reaction to any woman more womanly than Maomao, but even so, the silence seemed rather longer than usual.

Consort Lishu, tears beading in her eyes, was blushing too, and didn't say anything either. Quite a change from the way the color had drained from her face in terror at the lion. Her pallor changed quicker than the sky at twilight, Maomao observed.

And as for Maomao, she didn't say anything either. The main difference between her and the other two was that her face remained its usual color, although the awkwardness was getting to her a bit.

Um... Hm. Hmmm...

What was going on here? The only thing Maomao could tell for sure was that the other two were so busy blushing at each other that as far as they were concerned, she didn't exist.

It was like this: in those illustrated novels that had been all the rage in the rear palace, the stories always ended with a picture of the man and the

woman together. It was practically a given. The one thing you never saw in an illustration like that was a third wheel.

Get it together! Maomao thought at them. It reminded her of the landlord's daughter and the quack's nephew back at the paper village—they hadn't been able to take a hint either.

For better or worse, the awkwardness was promptly dispelled. With the lion subdued and moved into a new cage, a lot of noisy chattering began.

"Someone call a doctor! We have an injured man here!"

That got Maomao's attention; she scrambled out from under the table. Consort Lishu was still staring into space and didn't seem to realize she'd left. When Maomao saw Ah-Duo approaching, it was an even better excuse to make tracks.

She worked her way over to the injured person, thinking maybe it was one of the keepers, but when she got there she discovered Uryuu with a scratch on his cheek.

"Father, be strong! Don't leave us!" Lishu's half-sister was clinging to her father and wailing like the heroine of a tragedy.

Uh... It's just a scratch. Maomao, a look of annoyance on her face, was just about to leave the scene again when the half-sister cried, "How dare he! How dare he injure my poor, beloved father just to stop some silly lion!"

Evidently, the scratch had been inflicted by a piece of flying metal when Basen had brought the iron bar to bear against the animal.

"He hurt my father! He'll pay for this!" she yelled. It was almost comical; it was obvious she was less concerned for her father's well-being than she was interested in *looking* concerned so as to make herself more attractive to the watching crowd. The real issue was *who* had injured her dear, beloved father.

There was a voice like a sharp blade: "I must apologize for that." It was beautiful, yes, but what was beautiful could also be terrible. "I see you've taken exception to my servant's actions." It was Jinshi, a slight frown on his lips; Basen stood behind him, looking stunned. His right hand, the one that had been holding the iron bar, was red and swollen. "However," Jinshi said, "if he hadn't intervened, Consort Lishu would have been in danger. I must ask you to forgive his impropriety."

Jinshi was being extremely reserved. If anything, Uryuu should have been in *his* debt after Basen had saved his daughter, but Uryuu acted less than

impressed. “I see. My thanks, then...”

Consort Lishu was watching her father from behind Ah-Duo. She was obviously anxious for him, knowing he was hurt, but with her sister there she wasn’t willing to get close.

Come to think of it, we still don’t know, do we? Maomao thought, remembering the request Lishu had made of her. There were things even Maomao couldn’t figure out. She’d thought that if she couldn’t work out the truth on their trip, maybe she would write a letter to her old man to ask if he knew any way of ascertaining parentage. *The bond between a parent and a child, is it?* Maomao thought, letting her gaze settle on Uryuu and the half-sister. The young woman appeared to be trying to figure out a way to walk back her comment, but nothing was coming to her and her mouth simply flapped open and shut.

Boy, she’s got bad teeth. The decay was well advanced, to the point that they had turned black. Maybe it was all those sweet foods. At her age, she certainly didn’t have any baby teeth left; there would be no fixing this. Maomao thought about selling the young woman some toothbrushing powder to help keep it from getting any worse—but hard on the heels of that thought, she had another. Almost before she knew what she was doing, she was standing in front of Uryuu.

“Wh-What are you doing?” the half-sister asked.

Maomao grinned at her. “I’m not a doctor, but I’m something of an apothecary.” Then she grabbed Uryuu’s chin violently. He reacted with intense surprise, but Maomao simply went on, “This scratch is nothing much. Rub some spit into it and it’ll heal, no problem.”

“Sp-Spit?!” Uryuu exclaimed.

She’d only been joking. In fact, human saliva could be toxic itself, so it was best not to use it in one’s medical procedures.

“But how about the inside of your mouth?” she said.

“Hrgh?!” Uryuu exclaimed as she forced his mouth open. She was greeted by a faint whiff of alcohol. She carefully inspected his teeth, which were crooked, as one would expect for a man of his age.

Then Maomao grinned again. “Here, a free bonus.”

“What?” the half-sister said—immediately before Maomao wrenched *her* mouth open too.

Geez! Clean your teeth! Maomao thought. It wasn’t just the young

woman's front teeth—the ones in back were in pretty bad shape too. Was that why she was always covering her mouth with her folding fan—to conceal the state of her teeth? This was one overindulged young woman. But now wasn't the time to be thinking about how to do effective dental treatment.

Finally, Maomao stood up and marched over to Lishu. "One for the road."

Lishu couldn't speak for shock as Maomao opened her mouth, revealing a set of small, white teeth. Her nurse must have had a good sense of discipline, because her teeth were still clean.

"Wh-What do you think you're doing?" the half-sister demanded, but Maomao ignored her and returned to Uryuu.

"Do you know how many teeth your late wife had?" she asked.

"How the hell am I supposed to know that?" he demanded, giving her a don't-ask-me-stupid-questions look.

"Fair enough," Maomao said. "But she wouldn't happen to have been missing a front tooth, would she? Like you?"

At that, Uryuu's expression changed.

In general, human adults have between twenty-eight and thirty-two teeth, depending on whether their wisdom teeth—the ones farthest back in the mouth—come in or not. But every once in a while, someone may have fewer than twenty-eight teeth. In about one out of every ten people, other teeth besides the wisdom teeth fail to come in. The exact reason for the phenomenon was unknown, but often the trait was passed from parents to children. An inheritance, as it were.

"You might be interested to know, Master Uryuu, that you, this young lady here, and Consort Lishu are all missing a lower front tooth. Considering how the teeth fit in the mouth, I think you were each born that way."

Maomao had felt like something was a little off when she looked in Lishu's mouth—that's what it had been. Teeth were essential to living a healthy life. If they went bad, toxins could even enter the body from them and make a person ill. When a person lost their teeth and could no longer eat easily, that was when they began to waste away.

If the chances of a naturally missing tooth were one in ten, it was always possible that any three given people would each be among that ten percent. However, for them all to be in the same place, and all missing the same relatively unusual tooth? It started to look a lot less like coincidence.

"Relatives often share certain traits. For example, Consort Lishu can't eat

white fish. You wouldn't happen to have the same dietary restriction, would you?"

"How did you know that?" Uryuu asked suspiciously.

"Simple enough. I observed how upset you were by the fish platter at dinner. I can hardly think a man as old and no doubt mature as yourself would react like that simply because he didn't *like* the food." She recalled how he'd sent the tray of fish flying. "And I'm certainly confident that no high official of this nation would treat someone so poorly because of simple personal preferences or misunderstandings." Maomao smiled thinly and looked from Uryuu to Lishu and back. "Perhaps you might show your *other* daughter some parental affection from time to time."

Maybe, she thought, she'd gone a little far. But now, even the densest listener would grasp her point.

I hope that'll do the trick.

She had provided as much of an answer as she could.

Epilogue

It really does get cold*,* Maomao thought. She had a light wrap around her shoulders but she was still shivering. She was definitely regretting not having another cup of wine.

It would have been warmer inside the building, but quite frankly, there was too much trouble in there. She worried about what would happen to the lion now that its nose was broken, but she wasn't feeling compassionate enough to help the big cat at the risk of being eaten herself. Yes, the lion was just a poor animal who'd been caged and put on display, but it had still attacked someone. Lahan had nonetheless thought it would be a waste not to try to fix the creature—and he'd attempted to get Maomao to do the job. Evidently he saw the tousle-haired beast as another beautiful collection of numbers, and he wouldn't shut up about how the shattered nose disrupted that beauty. That was when she'd escaped out here.

The sky seemed so vast. There was no moon, making the stars appear to shine all the brighter. Three of them shone brightest of all, forming a triangle in the heavens. Perhaps those stars were the two lovers, and the river that separated them.

I wish they'd hurry and wrap things up in there. Maomao was just contemplating whether there might be a way for her to sneak back to Gyokuen's mansion when she heard footsteps behind her.

"Your honored cousin is looking for you."

"It's perfectly all right to just ignore him." So Maomao wasn't the only one who'd fled the hubbub. "Don't you have more work to do?" she asked. All right, so Basen had stolen the spotlight when the lion attacked, but surely this man could still be of *some* help.

"Are you hoping I'll drop dead from sheer overwork?"

"Perish the thought," she said.

Jinshi—who had indeed ducked away from his responsibilities—didn't seem to think her answer was entirely sincere. The wooden bench creaked softly as he sat down beside her. Then he set something between them. It

appeared to be a piece of metal.

"Basen was right," Jinshi said. "It was weak. Quality iron would have held together better." There were a number of ways of casting iron, and if you got it wrong, the inside could turn out hollow, weakening the structure. "It's almost like someone *wanted* it to break."

"An unsettling idea."

There was something Maomao had been wondering about as well: the way the lion had gone straight for Consort Lishu, as if specifically targeting her. It had seemed to ignore Maomao in favor of the consort.

Just because it was starving? she thought. That was a possibility. *Maybe because she'd been holding meat.* Another possibility. But Maomao couldn't stop thinking about the perfume the consort had been doused in. Something so pungent would certainly have been detectable to a wild animal. What if that was what had attracted the lion's attention? Maomao sat and thought silently.

"Hey, don't just go quiet," Jinshi said after a moment.

He should have known very well by now that Maomao rarely initiated a conversation. Why had he decided to sit by her, anyway? He should stop slacking and get back to work already.

"I suppose you're wishing I would just go back to work," said Jinshi.

"Me, sir? Never."

He *did* know what she was thinking occasionally; that was the trouble with him. Maomao had to work very hard to pretend that her face didn't want to convulse into a major scowl.

"If I went back, one of two things would happen. Either I would have to work, or I would be mobbed by women."

"The less popular men in the world might call for your head to hear you complain about such things."

Men who had money and status and looks to boot were just *different*. A moonless night like this—he ought to be more careful.

"What they're really after is the Imperial blood, don't you think?" Jinshi said. Meaning his children, she supposed. Or perhaps his life.

"I should think at least half of it is your looks, sir."

"Don't say that." Jinshi frowned as if he'd eaten a particularly unpleasant bug. For some reason, even though he possessed beauty beyond virtually anyone Maomao had ever seen, he seemed to have some kind of inferiority

complex about it. His fingers brushed the scar on his cheek. The stain on his beauty was lamented by all and sundry, yet was it her imagination, or did he almost seem fond of it?

Maomao, quite honestly, wasn't offended by the scar. No human was perfect. And Jinshi's appearance had been so flawless that it had belied what was within. What was wrong with this modest alteration to the appearance he'd been born with? Anyway, a scar it might have been, but Maomao's father had stitched it up, and he'd naturally done an excellent job. Each time Maomao had applied salve or makeup to Jinshi's cheek—which was not infrequently—she'd felt the wound growing less pronounced under her fingers.

"I would rather say my face had been burned, and continue wearing that makeup," Jinshi said.

"Eventually the color would cease to come out, sir. But if it's a burn you want, I'd be happy to help you." She could use him as a test subject for her burn medications at the same time.

"Stop that." After twenty days of wearing the makeup, a faint patch of red dye could still be seen on Jinshi's cheek; he'd been using a dusting of white powder to conceal it. "If I were actually burned, I think Gaoshun might collapse. But I admit, it would be easier in its own way. The makeup is certainly somewhat troublesome. I've found myself rather relaxed during this trip, though."

He seemed to be referring to the fact that no town girl would willingly make a move on a gloomy man with a burn on his face; and at the same time he was free of his usual desk work. Meanwhile, Maomao had felt that there had been nothing to do but watch the scenery roll by from the carriage window as her behind got sorer and sorer. Just the thought of the trip home was enough to depress her.

"Would you like to work on your horsemanship? I know you're getting tired of the carriage," he said.

"Yes, but I would rather just have a proper bed." She'd worked on hers during the trip. The problem was that she'd rarely had a chance to use it, since other people, very pleased with her work, always seemed to be lying there instead.

"Ah! Yes, I hope you'll be able to make it even more comfortable than before."

A shock of annoyance ran through Maomao. Jinshi had been the biggest offender as far as stealing her sleeping space. He would ride horseback as far as he wanted, and when he was tired he would come loll around. No wonder he thought it was relaxing!

"His Majesty did tell me to try to enjoy myself on this trip," Jinshi said with a slightly twisted smile. "And to make a good choice."

Which choice he was referring to went unspoken: he meant choice of bride. Many women had been gathered here for just that purpose. Whatever choice he made, there would be politics involved. It might affect the very government of the nation. He could strengthen ties with a neighboring country, or gain the support of a domestic faction. Jinshi's own status might even change, depending on what he decided. The fact that Sei-i-shu had been willing to provide the venue for all this activity made their message clear: *align yourself with the west.* No doubt that also explained why Uryuu had brought his other daughter.

I wonder who he'll pick, Maomao thought. Not that it really mattered to her. She was just a humble apothecary. That was her perspective, anyway...

No sooner had she registered something brushing her fingers than a hand grabbed her wrist. It pulled her until she was palm-to-palm with his other hand, their fingers intertwined. The other hand was a good bit larger than hers, and rougher. Long fingers clutched Maomao's hand so that she couldn't get away.

"Perhaps you'd be so kind as to let go of me, sir?"

"But if I let go, won't you run away?"

"Are you going to do something I'll need to run from?"

"You do make me want to hit you sometimes." Jinshi looked at Maomao like a wild animal hunting its prey. His expression made her think of a starving wild dog. It wasn't the face of either the eunuch Jinshi, or of the Emperor's younger brother. It was someone else again.

"Not in the face. It would be too obvious."

"I wasn't *actually* going to hit you."

"I know, sir." Jinshi wasn't the type who would lay a hand on a young woman. No, wait, actually he was—to make them vomit when they had ingested poison. "I know you wouldn't do worse than pin me and force me to empty the contents of my stomach."

"You brought that on yourself. Why would you even drink poison?!"

“I’m not sure I know how to answer that.”

Firsthand experience was just so much more memorable than merely asking questions. That was all. Maomao wasn’t any smarter than the average person, just a little more...dedicated. And when it came to emotion, that she actually had less of than most people. She felt sadness and happiness, anger and joy—less acutely than ordinary people, but they were there. But there were other emotions that people allegedly possessed which Maomao still didn’t understand.

She could feel Jinshi’s pulse in the palm of his hand. He had started to sweat, and the place where their hands joined was slick. She looked up to see long eyelashes lying low over eyes the color of obsidian. Those eyes watched her intently, from so close that she could see herself reflected in them.

The courtesans had a saying: once you know it, it’s hell.

But the men, too, had a saying: to know it was exactly why they went there.

That word, that simple four-letter word with its *o* and its *e*, was sometimes called vulgar, and sometimes turned out to be nothing more than a game—but some people said it was impossible to live without it.

Jinshi’s free hand reached for Maomao’s head, his fingers stroking her hair—but they stopped behind her head. “You’re actually wearing it,” he said. His hand had found the hair stick, the silver piece with the moon and the poppy. Maomao had thought maybe it had come from Lahan—but apparently not. No wonder everyone had seemed so intrigued by it.

“Oh, it was from you, Master Jinshi? The moon is well and good, but the poppy is a questionable touch.” She was thinking about the White Lady. The flower on the hair stick looked like a larger version of the common poppy, but it was technically an opium poppy. It could be used to make the drug.

“Please. I had that made before we left on this trip. To replace the other one.” His voice came from above her, his chin resting on her head. His fingers played through her hair, and she could feel his breath on her. Anyone who happened to see them could be forgiven for assuming they were in an intimate embrace.

“Master Jinshi, please keep your distance.”

“Why should I?”

“What will you do if someone sees us?”

They couldn’t be the only ones who had ducked away from the banquet.

The trees shielded them from sight, but there was no guarantee someone wouldn't happen by. Jinshi of all people knew exactly why this banquet was being held.

"Sir, Consort Lishu is not your niece. You don't have to worry about closeness of blood," Maomao said calmly. Jinshi's face, though, grew tighter. Maomao went on, "Wouldn't she be the safest choice?"

She would forget all about the moment she'd seen Lishu and Basen gazing at each other. Yes, she'd pretend it had never happened. Even if something were to blossom between them, it could have no meaning. Better to act as if it had never existed.

"The safe choice. Like hell!" Jinshi's voice in her ear was like a cold blade. His fingers stopped running through her hair and slid down to the nape of her neck, curling themselves around her throat. Long, slim fingers that began to press.

"It hurts..."

"Oh, does it?"

It was painful—but Jinshi only squeezed harder. His other hand, still intertwined with hers, worked its way up her back. No, no! He was going to twist her arm out of joint.

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With her throat crushed and her arm wrenched, Maomao's face contorted with agony. She tilted her head back in hopes of somehow managing to get some air, her mouth flapping open like a fish. She must've looked ridiculous —and there was Jinshi, looking down at her.

Until finally—

Maomao greedily sucked in the air she was suddenly allowed. An aroma of flowers tickled her nose. Jasmine. Somehow, she'd always thought a celestial nymph would smell like peaches. Her thin lips felt dry and hot.

The hand that had choked her moved to support the back of her head, while his other hand disentangled itself from her fingers and wrapped around her waist instead.

She didn't know how long they sat that way. All she knew was that Jinshi was looking down at her with a faintly triumphant expression, as if he saw that the breath had reached every corner of her body now. He wiped away the tears that had sprung to her eyes as she struggled to breathe.

It was then that Maomao felt a flash of intense anger. "I said that if you were going to kill me, you should do it with poison," she told him.

"I refuse to let you poison yourself," Jinshi said, his fingers tracing her lips. "You can't pretend you didn't know that you were one of the candidates. As much as I'm sure you'd like to." He wasn't done, either: "Who was that man, anyway? I'm *sure* you're not a dancer."

So he *had* been watching them!

"I was just paying for my drink," Maomao said. "It didn't cost much." She tried to look away, but with his hand on her head, she really couldn't. Maomao was thinking fast, trying to come up with any way out of this situation. "Exactly what use did you think I could be to you?"

"Lahan accompanied you, didn't he? That's what everyone else will see."

Maomao understood what Jinshi was getting at. Perhaps it was even what Lahan had been counting on from the beginning. She felt the anger again; she would have to give his toes a good crushing later.

The La family was unique among the named clans in that they had no faction at court. One could argue that made Maomao a safe choice in her own way—much as Rikuson had said. There was just one problem.

"You'd make an enemy of you-know-who."

She meant the monocled freak, of course. She could only imagine what might have happened here had he been present. He would have made a scene

so big that an escaped lion would have seemed like child's play in comparison.

Jinshi shivered—how could he not?—but it quickly passed.

"We were going to continue things later, weren't we?"

She found herself pinned again. He was pushing her down onto the bench. His hand in her hair pressed so hard. Something more than breath came past her lips. Now she saw those obsidian eyes, that feral look, from inches away. They shone brighter than any star, and yet there was a subtle darkness to them. This was a man who'd had everything in life, and yet sometimes he seemed to hunger for something that he struggled to satisfy.

Why can't he pick someone else?

There had to be someone out there who could give Jinshi what he was seeking. There were certainly plenty who *wanted* to. Why did he need to go out of his way to pick a creature who lacked precisely that desire?

She wanted to run. This could only bring more trouble, more uncertainty. She wanted to dodge all those problems—but those eyes, the eyes of an untamed dog, weren't going to let her escape. He was going to devour her, and all in pursuit of something that wasn't even there. Maomao could only look back at him with empty eyes, like those of a puppet or a doll.

That only seemed to further agitate the dog's anxieties; he leaned his weight onto Maomao as if he was going to crush her. *So now he wants to suffocate me*, she thought. He must have weighed twice what she did. She knew the courtesans sometimes took customers three times their size. Didn't it hurt them? But even if it did, what would her sister Pairin, a professional among professionals, make of such griping?

"You can't let him grab the initiative just because he's the customer." Maomao remembered hearing her say that once, a bit of advice she'd accompanied with a sultry gesture. That was back when she'd been teaching Maomao the courtesan's trade (very much over the younger woman's objections).

Maomao said nothing. Honestly, perhaps it would have been better to remain still and quiet, like a doll. Or maybe not. What we can say is this: remembering Pairin meant remembering the techniques Pairin had taught her, had drilled into her despite her protests; she'd worked Maomao to the verge of tears, until Maomao was able to perform them to her sister's satisfaction. Until those techniques became not just a response, but an instinctive reaction.

So let it be said that Maomao could not be held responsible for what she was about to do.

Meaning what? Meaning...

Maomao swallowed the saliva in her mouth with a heavy *gulp*. Her lips began to drift apart, then opened, an invitation to him; and then, again instinctively, she slid closer to him.

Jinshi's expression was a mixture of surprise and happiness, but it didn't last long. Soon his body responded with gentle spasms, and his grip on Maomao loosened.

To say again: none of this was Maomao's fault. This was beyond her control.

She responded to him with the most refined techniques of the pleasure quarter.

○●○

How long was one beholden to a weathered old promise made as playful children?

Ah-Duo chuckled to herself. She sat on a cold rock in the garden, a blanket across her shoulders and a drink in her hand. The night air could truly chill here in the sandy capital. A good, strong alcohol was just what she needed.

She'd already put Consort Lishu, all but feverish with tension, to bed. Now she was enjoying the drink she hadn't had a chance to savor before.

"I've no interest in anyone but you for my bride."

Don't make promises you can't keep, she said in her mind. *You don't have the authority.* She knew perfectly well that some of his closest advisors had hounded him after she had lost the ability to bear children. And her own hands weren't exactly clean. She'd tried to get her kind, beautiful friend to be unfaithful.

Her poor friend had been forced into a marriage with a partner who had been chosen for her, purely to perpetuate the family line. Why not ignore that situation, Ah-Duo had thought. Why not rather be a flower that bloomed at the very crest of the nation?

But it hadn't gone the way she'd imagined it would. The conversation had ended with her friend slapping Ah-Duo's cheek as hard as she could and

crying, “Don’t mock me!”

Ah-Duo knew this young woman to be kind. To be beautiful. To be intelligent. She’d prepared a far better, a more fitting place for her—and yet it had only made her friend furious.

Ah-Duo just didn’t understand the female heart. Maybe it was because she herself was no longer a woman, or maybe she had never understood it. In any case, she saw that she had badly wounded her friend’s pride.

She became a consort as an extension of friendship, without love. And then she’d borne a child. Ah-Duo had always thought she was a rather twisted excuse for a woman, but apparently she still possessed what they called the maternal instinct. She had loved the child she bore at the cost of her own womb more than anything. The infant was wrinkled like a monkey; it waved its hands, so small they looked like they would break at the merest touch, and cried for milk.

There was a nursemaid there, but Ah-Duo had insisted on holding her own child. She’d tried to give it milk, but there wasn’t enough to satisfy the baby. Ah-Duo’s body was no longer that of a woman.

The infant was returned to the nursemaid.

Wracked with despair, Ah-Duo thought only of her child. She thought only of how to help the tiny, vulnerable thing survive. And she reached a decision.

“They look so much alike.” Her child and his uncle had been born at almost the same time. Concerned about her infant’s failure to put on weight, Ah-Duo had marshaled herself to go see her mother-in-law. “You could switch them, and it seems like no one would know.”

She’d been half joking, but half serious—gauging which way the other woman took her. All of their various attendants and nursemaids had been dismissed from the room.

“You might be right. Could you take care of him, please?” her mother-in-law said, picking up Ah-Duo’s child. She removed his swaddling clothes, preparing to change his diaper. Meanwhile, Ah-Duo accepted her brother-in-law and did the same, replacing his diaper with the one she’d brought along.

Each of them had just given birth, and each of them felt like she was missing a piece of her heart. There was nothing in Anshi’s eyes as she looked at her own child. Nobody seemed to notice because Anshi constantly kept a smile on her face. But she looked at Ah-Duo’s baby with genuine warmth.

Perhaps she found her son's child lovable even as her husband's seemed hateful to her. Perhaps that was why she said nothing, even when Ah-Duo left and went back to her pavilion with Anshi's child still in her arms. They exchanged the healthy, bouncing babies as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Later, the child that Ah-Duo was raising died. Perhaps, without that switch, it would have lived. Ah-Duo mourned the loss, for she had come to love the child—but she was also glad to know that her own offspring was still alive. Anshi's child had died unloved by its own mother, with its rightful place usurped by its nephew, and all before it could even bewail its own fate.

The death appeared to shake both Ah-Duo and Anshi. The naughty little troublemaker who had always given the serving women such headaches was now enough of a grown-up to sense it—but he was also young enough that he had to lash out somehow. A doctor was banished from the rear palace.

Fate was a strange thing, though: that physician's adopted daughter was now her son's favorite. There were the princesses from foreign lands, the daughter of Empress Gyokuyou's household, Consort Lishu, the girl in question, and—just for good measure—Suirei as well. Ah-Duo hadn't brought her along simply on a lark. She might have her...issues, but when it came to bloodline she was every bit as qualified as the others. Although if that had become known here in this place, it would have caused quite the commotion.

Ah-Duo chuckled again.

A promise between playful children. That's all it had been, and yet he was intent on trying to keep it. Yet he hadn't been able to refuse a request from the little moon, little Yue. He had picked a flower from the vast garden that was the rear palace and made Yue a little brother. The reason he had sent Yue to the rear palace as a eunuch—was it a punishment for a promise broken? Or was it compassion, a way of giving him more chances to see Ah-Duo?

Whichever, Ah-Duo took full advantage of the opportunity to tease the lovely eunuch each time he visited her. It was the most delightful thing.

Ultimately she had been dismissed from her position as one of the Four Ladies, but now she lived in a villa and listened to him complain. She wished the bearded old grump could send someone a little younger in his place. She was glad the children had been able to come live with her. Yes, youth was a wonderful thing. And it was so much fun to tease Suirei.

But there was something else Ah-Duo must not forget—a second playful promise. A vow made when the question of whose status was appropriate for what had not yet entered her mind.

"Sure, why not? I might as well let you make me a mother of the nation."

And the idiot, he'd agreed immediately. Had he understood what he was really saying? And did he still remember it now, now that he had a great flower of the west for his Empress?

"We'll just have to see what happens," Ah-Duo said to herself, swirling the drink in her cup, resolving to watch over Yue and discover which flower he chose.

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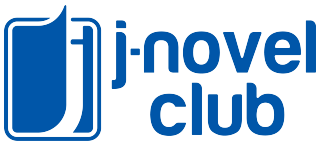

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